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# Commodore James Biddle and his Sketch Book

*By* NICHOLAS B. WAINWRIGHT





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Nicholas B. Wainwright

COMMODORE JAMES BIDDLE

Painted for Nicholas Biddle in 1839 by Thomas Sully

# Commodore James Biddle and his Sketch Book

*By* NICHOLAS B. WAINWRIGHT

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Commodore James Biddle





## *Commodore James Biddle and his Sketch Book*

THE former Commander in Chief of the United States Naval Forces in the Pacific sat at his desk while his line-of-battle ship, flying his broad pennant, ploughed homeward on the final leg of a cruise that had taken nearly three years and which had covered 69,000 miles. Since the immediate responsibility for the ship was its captain's concern, the Commodore devoted his time to his books and correspondence. From his nephew, who knew that the Commodore was on his last cruise, had come a request for biographical data, a summary of his nearly half a century in the Navy. The veteran officer's memory was excellent, the query could be answered readily enough, if perfunctorily, for he was not prone to write about himself. At the top of a sheet of paper, he scrawled "To Lt. James S. Biddle, U. S. Navy, Phila.—*Columbus* at Sea. Feby 12, 1848—My dear James. . . ." The sentences which followed were factual, but they did little more than hint at a life of adventure and attainment.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This article is the first account of Commodore Biddle based on his own papers. Mr. Charles J. Biddle of Andalusia kindly granted me access to these manuscripts, which are mounted in sixteen volumes. In addition, there are also several logs kept by the Commodore as well as an interesting memorandum book of his at Andalusia.

Commodore James Biddle had inherited both his love of the sea and his desire to serve his country. His Uncle James Biddle, for whom he was named, had enjoyed an active public life and had served as President Judge of the First Judicial District of Philadelphia. His Uncle Edward had been an officer in the French and Indian Wars, Speaker of the Pennsylvania Assembly, and a member of the First Continental Congress. A long, disabling illness barred him from participating in the Revolutionary drama, and Edward died at the age of forty-one in 1779, one of the might-have-beens of history. Uncle Nicholas' promising career had also been cut short. A captain in the Continental Navy, he was only twenty-eight years old in 1778 when the frigate he commanded, the *Randolph*, blew up during her unequal duel with the British ship of the line *Yarmouth*. Charles, the Commodore's father, was first a sea captain and then a politician and businessman. He held many offices, most notably that of Vice-President, under President Benjamin Franklin, of the Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania. Many of the country's Founding Fathers were entertained at his house when Philadelphia was the nation's capital. It was within this atmosphere of patriotism and achievement that his son James was educated. The second of Charles and Hannah Biddle's ten children, James was born in Philadelphia on February 18, 1783.

His older brother was William, a rather obscure lawyer, the only male member of the family who made no effort to win public recognition. After James came Edward, who displayed an astonishing ability at mathematics, and died young. Nicholas, the family prodigy, followed, a man of many talents, remembered chiefly as a banker. Then there was Charles, who failed in business and moved to Nashville, where he practiced law. In 1835, Andrew Jackson appointed him a commissioner to report upon trade routes across Central America and the Isthmus of Panama. Major Thomas Biddle was the most dashing of James's brothers. He served with distinction in the War of 1812 and was twice wounded. Later, he settled in St. Louis as army paymaster, and it was there that he was killed in a duel in 1831. Like Thomas, John Biddle also attained the rank of major in the War of 1812. Moving to Detroit, he enjoyed a distinguished career, served in Congress, and was president of the convention which framed Michigan's first constitution. Richard was the



youngest of the eight brothers, and perhaps the most scholarly. As a youth he had seen service in the War of 1812. He went on to become an eminent lawyer in Pittsburgh, served two terms in Congress, and was the author of the *Life of Sebastian Cabot*. The two youngest members of the family were Mary, who married her cousin John G. Biddle, and Ann, wife of Francis Hopkinson, a son of the Signer of the Declaration of Independence and the brother of Judge Joseph Hopkinson, who wrote "Hail Columbia."

Most of Charles Biddle's accomplished children exhibited a degree of restlessness as seen in their un-Philadelphia-like trait of seeking their fortunes in such far-off places as Tennessee, Missouri, Michigan, and western Pennsylvania. James and Edward were the first to leave their family home—James to wander all over the world, Edward never to return. Their fates were sealed in the fall of 1799 when the naval war with France was the talk of the day, and the hero of the war, Captain Thomas Truxtun, was a guest in their father's house. Truxtun's descriptions of the glories of the Navy so inflamed the boys' imaginations that they begged their father to let them enter the service. Reluctantly, Charles Biddle acceded; he exerted his influence with the Secretary of the Navy and James and Edward each received a midshipman's warrant dated February 14, 1800.<sup>2</sup>

They were assigned to the frigate *President*, fitting out for Captain Truxtun in New York, where the ship had just been built; not until July were they ordered to active duty. By this time, the best news their father could have heard was that the *President* had been destroyed by fire. Apprehensively, he escorted his sons to New York, where they stayed with Aaron Burr before going on board.

The *President's* excursion to the West Indies was uneventful; the war with France had ended and there were no prizes to take. It should have been as safe and pleasant a cruise as a worried father could have wished for his sons. Instead, it was one of tragedy, for Edward fell ill of "a fever" and died at sea. The reduction in the size of the Navy, which took place at the time of the *President's* return in 1801, threatened to end James Biddle's naval career as surely as death had terminated his brother's, but, fortunately

<sup>2</sup> *Autobiography of Charles Biddle, Vice-President of the Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania, 1745-1821* (Philadelphia, 1883), 286.

for James, he was one of those retained in the small peacetime establishment.

Early in 1802, he sailed on the *Constellation*, Captain Alexander Murray, for the Mediterranean, where a squadron was required to protect American commerce from the piratical Barbary states. The *Constellation* blockaded Tripoli for several months, on one occasion attacking the Tripolitan gunboats. To the delight of Midshipman Biddle, who was a keen student of the classics, the ship also visited many places renowned in ancient history.<sup>3</sup>

Returning in the spring of 1803, the *Constellation* was laid up at Washington and Biddle was transferred to Captain William Bainbridge's frigate, the *Philadelphia*, which sailed in July for the Mediterranean. There it joined Commodore Edward Preble's squadron. The strict naval blockade of Tripoli, instituted by Preble, soon proved disastrous for the *Philadelphia*; while giving chase to an enemy vessel on October 31 she ran on a reef just outside Tripoli Harbor.

Unable to get his ship afloat, Bainbridge sent First Lieutenant David Porter and Midshipman Biddle to announce her surrender. This mission the American officers were unable to accomplish with decorum. When their barge came alongside the nearest Tripolitan gunboat "Nearly twenty men of ferocious appearance, armed with sabres, pistols, and muskets, jumped into the boat and at once commenced their work of insult and of plunder. Two of them snatched Mr. Biddle's sword, pulled off his coat, and began to fight for it, until at length, probably to decide their dispute, they returned it to him. His cravats were violently torn from his neck, his waistcoat and shirt opened, and his breast exposed, for the purpose, as he very naturally inferred, of perpetrating their horrid vengeance, though their intention, it appeared, was only to search for valuables that might be concealed about his person. They searched all his pockets and took all his papers and money, except twenty dollars in gold which he had slipped into his boots and thereby secured. The officers and crew of the boat were then carried on shore, conducted amidst the shouts and acclamations of a barbarous rabble to the palace gates, and ushered into the presence of the bashaw, who,

<sup>3</sup> "A Journal kept on board the United States Frigate *Constellation*, Alexander Murray Esquire Commander, by James Biddle, Midshipman," James Biddle Papers.

seated in state and surrounded by his ministers and his guards, was ready to receive them in the audience chamber." For nineteen months, the crew of the *Philadelphia* was held prisoner.<sup>4</sup>

During this period, Captain Bainbridge and Biddle became fast friends. An undated note written by the Captain to his young mid-



Courtesy Charles J. Biddle

MIDSHIPMAN JAMES BIDDLE, 1802

shipman reflects their relationship: "I request that you will not only consider me as a commander who respects you as an officer (and as such bound to render you every service in the line of his duty) but as a friend who sincerely esteems you. Therefore request of me as you would of your father. My friendship you have, my purse and services are at your command. I shall keep you with me until I consign you

<sup>4</sup> *The Port Folio, Third Series*, VI (Philadelphia, 1815), 431-432.

to the arms of your family.”<sup>5</sup> Of all the officers he served under, Biddle admired Bainbridge the most, a man whose bravery, chivalry, and generosity were proverbial in the Navy.

After the ratification of a treaty of peace and the payment of \$60,000 in ransom, the captives were at last released. Biddle and Bainbridge arrived home in September, 1805. Almost immediately, the younger man was ordered as acting lieutenant to the command of Gunboat Number 1, stationed at Charleston, South Carolina. From November until May, 1806, he cruised the coast of Georgia and South Carolina looking for pirates, and then came home on leave. On February 11, 1807, he was promoted lieutenant, but the Navy had so little duty to offer that Biddle obtained a furlough and went to China as first officer of a merchant ship, possibly one of Stephen Girard’s since it was an agent of Girard’s who arranged for Biddle’s quarters in the Imperial Factory No. 1 at Canton.<sup>6</sup> Many naval officers were seeking temporary employment in the merchant marine at this time.

Back from China in May, 1808, Biddle was again ordered to the distasteful gunboat service, this time with the Delaware flotilla whose duty it was to enforce the Embargo Act, a measure designed to withhold American products from England and France, and thereby discourage those embattled nations from interfering with American commerce. Gunboat duty was about all that offered; until recently only one frigate, the *Chesapeake*, was in commission. However, on June 22, 1807, had occurred the *Chesapeake* incident in which the British *Leopard* humiliated the American ship. An angered nation then realized that its Navy was too small and three frigates had been ordered recommissioned, among them the *President* for Commodore Bainbridge, who obtained Biddle as one of his officers.

The *President* put to sea in the summer of 1809, cruising along the coast. The following summer her officers and those of the *Constitution* were interchanged, but two months later Commodore

<sup>5</sup> Undated note from Bainbridge to Biddle, James Biddle Papers, XVI, document 6303. The James Biddle Papers are mounted in chronological order. References to volume and document numbers are given only in cases where manuscripts cannot be readily located by their dates.

<sup>6</sup> George W. Biddle to James Biddle, Sept. 4, 1807, James Biddle Papers.



John Rodgers ordered Biddle back to the *President*, Rodgers' own ship. Biddle continued in her until December, 1810, when he again obtained leave, the *President* being moored at New London for the winter.<sup>7</sup>

In 1811, he lengthened leave into a furlough and made a voyage to Lisbon as supercargo of a merchant vessel. Later in the year, in the brig *Hornet* of eighteen guns, Biddle again sailed for Europe, this time as bearer of dispatches to the American minister in France. On this agreeable duty, he spent four months in Paris, was presented to Napoleon, and attended parties at the Tuilleries.<sup>8</sup>

Shortly after his return home, the War of 1812 broke out, and in July Biddle was assigned as first lieutenant of Captain Jacob Jones's sloop of war *Wasp*. On October 13, 1812, the *Wasp* sailed from the Delaware, lost two seamen and her jib boom during a gale in the Gulf Stream, and, intercepting the track of vessels passing between Halifax and Bermuda, on October 18 sighted six British merchant ships under the convoy of the sloop of war *Frolic*.<sup>9</sup> So rough was the ocean that in the engagement which followed the muzzles of the guns were frequently in the water. Finally, Captain Jones gave orders to run the enemy on board, and the two vessels struck with a tremendous crash. Sword in hand, Biddle led the boarders, narrowly escaping being crushed to death between the two ships as they rose and fell in the heavy seas. Such havoc had been wreaked by the *Wasp's* final broadside that he met no resistance. The British officers surrendered their swords and Biddle hauled down the *Frolic's* colors.

The action left both sloops disabled, the *Frolic*, indeed, being dismasted. In this vulnerable situation, escape from the *Poictiers*, a British seventy-four, was impossible. Taken to Bermuda, Jones and his officers were released a month later on parole and came home to be exchanged.

The capture of the *Frolic* was one of the proud moments of the war. Congress voted Jones a gold medal, and a silver one for each of his officers. The Pennsylvania legislature presented a handsome,

<sup>7</sup> James Biddle's service record is attached to his letter of June 21, 1842, to Abel P. Upshur. Historical Society of Pennsylvania (HSP).

<sup>8</sup> *The Port Folio, Third Series*, VI, 435.

<sup>9</sup> Capt. Jacob Jones's report, James Biddle Papers, II, document 2712.

gold-hilted sword to Biddle,<sup>10</sup> of whom Jones had written: "Lieutenant Biddle's active conduct contributed much to our success, by the exact attention paid to every department during the engagement, and the animating example he afforded the crew by his intrepidity."<sup>11</sup> Other honors followed, among them a gift from a number of his friends of a silver urn, "bearing upon it an appropriate inscription, and a representation of the action between the *Wasp* and the *Frolic*, in which you so conspicuously assisted to exalt the naval character of our country."<sup>12</sup>

On being exchanged, and promoted commander on March 5, 1813, Biddle found himself again on gunboat service, commanding the Delaware flotilla of ten boats, each manned by a crew of thirty-five. From this unexciting duty of protecting Delaware Bay, he escaped a few months later by gaining the command of the *Hornet*, then lying at New York. The *Hornet* was similar to the *Wasp*, carried a crew of 140, and had been launched at Baltimore in 1805.

Shortly after she sailed from New York, in company with the frigates *United States* and *Macedonian*, the American squadron was intercepted by a superior force of the enemy and chased into New London, where it sought safety up the Thames River. During the blockade that followed, Biddle chafed at his inability to participate actively in the war. With the permission of Commodore Decatur, he several times went on board Commodore Sir Thomas Hardy's flagship, the British seventy-four *Ramilies*, on guard off New London. Biddle tried to negotiate a challenge fight between his *Hornet* and the British *Loup Cervier* (formerly the *Wasp*), but acceptable arrangements could not be made before the *Loup Cervier* sailed away.<sup>13</sup>

Unable to get the *United States* and *Macedonian* out, the government ordered them dismantled, and transferred their crews, leaving Biddle to protect the ships. Finally, on the night of November 18, 1814, he ran the blockade with his *Hornet* and returned to New York after seventeen frustrating months at New London. Before long, he was at sea again, this time on a cruise to the East Indies under the command of Decatur, who had sailed on the *President*. The *Peacock*,

<sup>10</sup> The sword and silver medal are both owned by Mrs. Harold Paumgarten.

<sup>11</sup> *The Port Folio, Third Series*, VI, 438.

<sup>12</sup> The urn is owned by the United States Naval Academy.

<sup>13</sup> *The Port Folio, Third Series*, VI, 440-441.

the *Hornet*, and a supply ship, the *Tom Bowline*, followed on January 23, 1815, became separated, and proceeded individually toward their rendezvous, the island of Tristan d'Acunha.

Disgusted with his cruise, during which he had boarded only four vessels, all of them neutrals, Biddle was about to anchor off that island on March 23 just as a sail was sighted.<sup>14</sup> He hove to and let her approach to within nearly musket distance, when she hoisted English colors. The wary Americans were ready for this sign and answered by showing their ensign and firing an immediate broadside. The cannonade became so furious that the contest was necessarily short. From first to last the action took only twenty-two minutes. Although of equal armament, the British warship, the brig *Penguin*, could not match the *Hornet's* accuracy and rate of fire, and had no recourse but to run her adversary down. Her bowsprit, thrusting in between the *Hornet's* main and mizzen rigging, afforded an ideal opportunity for boarding. Biddle mustered his men to repel the expected attack, but no boarders came. Instead, the senior British lieutenant, the captain having been killed, shouted that he surrendered. Biddle ordered his marines and musketry men to cease fire, and mounted the taffrail to speak to the lieutenant only to be shot from a range of twelve yards by a British sailor, who was instantly killed by two of the marines who had sighted him in the moment of firing. His ball struck Biddle a stunning blow on the chin, tore the flesh on his neck, and went out through his collar. Earlier in the engagement, the American commander had been badly cut up by flying splinters, so that by now he was covered with blood. Nevertheless, with a shirt tied around his neck as a bandage, he refused all assistance until the wounds of his men had been dressed.<sup>15</sup>

Biddle lost only one man killed. However, his first lieutenant, David Conner, had suffered a serious grapeshot wound in the hip and was on the critical list. The *Penguin* had been so badly shot up that, after the removal of a carved figure of a penguin which he sent to his father as a trophy, Biddle ordered her scuttled. His own ship, following some repairs to her rigging, was in good shape, and he was once more in company with the *Peacock* and the schooner *Tom Bowline*, which took the British prisoners on board. On April 12, Decatur

<sup>14</sup> James Biddle to Charles Biddle, Apr. 9, 1815, Andalusia.

<sup>15</sup> *The Port Folio*, Third Series, VI, 445.

not having appeared,<sup>16</sup> the *Hornet* and the *Peacock* made for the Cape of Good Hope, and on April 27 raised a sail, to which they gave chase, thinking her an East Indiaman.

The chase took on a new complexion when the anticipated victim turned out to be His Britannic Majesty's *Cornwallis* of seventy-four guns, and, as the American ships fled on separate courses, it became clear that this powerful ship of the line had selected the *Hornet* for her victim. In his efforts to escape, Biddle lightened his vessel by jettisoning ballast, shot, heavy spars, and the sheet anchor with its cable, but the Britisher kept him in sight. "At daylight on the twenty-ninth," wrote Biddle, "he was within gunshot upon our lee quarter. At seven A.M., having hoisted English colours, and a rear-admiral's flag, he commenced firing from his bow guns. As his shot went over us, I cut away the remaining anchor and cable, threw overboard the launch, six of our guns, more of our shot and every heavy article that was at hand. The enemy fired about thirty shot, not one of which took effect, though most of them passed over us. While he was firing, I had the satisfaction to perceive that we slowly dropped him, and at nine A. M. he ceased to fire." By noon, the *Cornwallis* had again closed the gap to within three-quarters of a mile and again opened fire. Although the sea was smooth and the winds light, only three of her shots came on board the *Hornet*, and the effect of her firing was to deaden her wind and drop her out of range. The *Cornwallis* continued the chase until the morning of April 30, when she "haled off to the eastward." Biddle later commented "I did not at any time fire our stern chasers because it was manifest that the enemy injured his sailing by firing."<sup>17</sup>

Being without guns, boats, or anchors, he made for St. Salvador, Brazil, to refit, and, on arriving there on June 9, learned that peace had been declared. By July 20, he was back in New York, having fought the last regular action of the war, a service for which Congress voted him a gold medal.<sup>18</sup> Biddle also learned that five months earlier, on February 28, 1815, he had been advanced to the rank of captain.

<sup>16</sup> As Biddle suspected, Decatur and the *President* had been captured by the British.

<sup>17</sup> *The Port Folio*, Third Series, VI, 447.

<sup>18</sup> The gold medal is owned by Mrs. Harold Paumgarten. Congress also granted \$25,000 to the officers and crew for the capture of the *Penguin*. Biddle's share of this was \$3,750. James Biddle to Nicholas Biddle, Feb. 27 [1820], James Biddle Papers, XV, document 6063.



Returning to Philadelphia, he sat, gold-hilted presentation sword at his side, for Charles Willson Peale, who added the portrait to his collection of paintings of statesmen and military heroes in Independence Hall. Joseph Wood depicted him first in water colors and then in oils,<sup>19</sup> and from Wood's work Thomas Gimbrede engraved two plates to illustrate Captain Biddle's biographical memoirs, which appeared in the November, 1815, issues of *The Port Folio* and the *Analectic Magazine*. A pair of lithographs showing his capture of the *Penguin* and his escape from the *Cornwallis* was published, and was dedicated to him. Biddle found himself one of the heroes of the day.

After a time on shore, during which he vainly sought the command of the *Macedonian*,<sup>20</sup> he was appointed in August, 1817, to the command of the sloop of war *Ontario*, then fitting out in New York for special duty. Biddle soon had the ship ready to sail, but her destination was uncertain. At first she was to carry Caesar Augustus Rodney, and two other commissioners appointed by President Monroe, to the east coast of South America, where they were to investigate the political status of the newly established republics. The commissioners inspected the *Ontario*, announced their quarters were too small, and departed. Next came rumors that the *Ontario* was to take Richard Rush, minister to the Court of St. James, to England,<sup>21</sup> later that she was to be ordered to the Columbia River where John Jacob Astor had lost his fur post to the British in the War of 1812. From New York, Captain Biddle informed his brother Nicholas "Astor is very anxious that my ship should go round Cape Horn & has written to that effect to the President."<sup>22</sup> Astor did more than write. It was evidently he who sent Judge John B. Prevost of New York to intercede with Monroe in this matter.

On September 26, Judge Prevost returned from Washington with news that Biddle actually was to convey him around Cape Horn to the Columbia, and that Monroe wanted the *Ontario* to sail on the

<sup>19</sup> The water color is owned by Mrs. Harold Paumgarten, and the oil painting by the United States Naval Academy. A similar oil painting hangs in the Governor's house at the Philadelphia Naval Home.

<sup>20</sup> James Biddle to Nicholas Biddle, Jan. 13, 1815 [1816], James Biddle Papers.

<sup>21</sup> James Biddle to Nicholas Biddle, Sept. 25, 1817, *ibid*.

<sup>22</sup> James Biddle to Nicholas Biddle [September, 1817], *ibid*., XV, document 6122.

twenty-eighth. The official orders were not dated in Washington, however, until September 30, when Prevost's information was confirmed and amplified. The *Ontario* was to touch at Rio de Janeiro, round the Horn, stop at Valparaiso and Callao, and then go to the mouth of the Columbia River, where Biddle and Prevost were to take possession of the territory in the name of the United States. Once again, Biddle had as his first officer David Conner, who had but recently laid aside the crutches he had used since the action with the *Penguin*.

The *Ontario* sailed from New York on October 4, the day after the Navy Department's orders were received.<sup>23</sup> Following a brief visit to Rio, where Biddle was presented to Dom John VI, King of Portugal and Brazil,<sup>24</sup> she made a fairly easy passage of the Horn, and on January 24, 1818, arrived in sight of Valparaiso. At this time, Chile was in revolt against Spain, whose waning power rested in the hands of a viceroy in Peru. A royalist army was advancing on Chile from Peru and off Valparaiso lay a Spanish blockading squadron, whose commander refused to grant Biddle permission to enter the harbor. But Biddle's orders were to visit Valparaiso and so in he went.

There he found five American ships in imminent danger of being cut out of the harbor by the Spaniards and confiscated. A large part of their crews had deserted to serve on Chilean privateers. Biddle managed to retrieve a number of the deserters and, through an interview with the Spanish admiral, arranged for the safety of the American vessels. In grateful recognition of his services, their masters presented him with a testimonial, certifying that "nearly a million of American property has been saved from certain condemnation and many American citizens from oppressive imprisonment by your exertion."<sup>25</sup>

Biddle remained in Valparaiso to protect Americans during a critical phase of the civil war. On April 12, a week after the Battle of Maypo, in which the Spanish army was defeated and American interests were no longer threatened, he sailed for Callao, the chief

<sup>23</sup> Two logs of the *Ontario's* cruise are at Andalusia. In addition, Biddle's comprehensive report of the cruise is contained in volume XVI of his papers.

<sup>24</sup> James Biddle to Nicholas Biddle, Nov. 23, 1817, James Biddle Papers.

<sup>25</sup> The original of this document, which was published in the *United States Gazette and True American* of July 3, 1818, is in *ibid.*

port of Peru, nine miles from Lima, the capital city. At Callao, the reception of the *Ontario* was so insulting that Biddle prepared to bombard the port, perceiving which the authorities made amends and the official Spanish attitude toward Americans, whose shipping they had been seizing, became a friendly one.<sup>26</sup> Visiting Lima on April 21, Biddle was requested by an officer of the viceroy to help prevent Chile from invading Peru. Would he be so good as to take a Spanish diplomat to Valparaiso to arrange a peaceful settlement?

The Captain consulted Judge Prevost. Should he not go on to the Columbia River as ordered instead of intervening in this dispute? No, no, Prevost assured him. Washington did not regard the visit to the Columbia as important; it was, indeed, only a blind to divert attention from the real object of the voyage—safeguarding American interests on the west coast of South America.

Consequently, in a meeting with the viceroy, Biddle agreed to help if the blockade of Valparaiso were raised. By the time he returned to that port on May 29, the Spanish squadron was gone. Negotiations between Chile and Peru failing, Biddle returned the Spanish commissioner to Callao, where he was warmly thanked by the viceroy, and then sailed for the Columbia. There on August 19 he landed with fifty of his men at a small cove within Cape Disappointment. In the presence of several natives, he unfurled the Stars and Stripes, turned up a sod of soil while the sailors gave three cheers and the *Ontario* fired a salute, and, lastly, he nailed to a tree a lead plate inscribed: "Taken possession of in the name and on the behalf of the United States by Captain James Biddle, commanding the U. S. Ship *Ontario*, Columbia River August 1818."

On August 25, the *Ontario* anchored at Monterey to get fresh provisions and water, encountering the Russian sloop of war *Kutusoff*, which had sailed from Europe in 1816 on a voyage of discovery. By October 22, Biddle was back in Lima, where, by adroit diplomacy, he persuaded the viceroy to release two American ships that the Spanish authorities were about to condemn, and to liberate from jail a number of American prisoners. The viceroy liked Biddle so much that he presented him with a valuable sword, which Biddle later turned over to the State Department.

<sup>26</sup> Fletcher Pratt, *Preble's Boys* (New York, 1950), 309. Pratt is cited with caution since his chapter on Biddle contains so many inaccuracies.

Returning to Valparaíso late in December, the Captain made the unhappy discovery that Chile had acquired a navy commanded by Lord Thomas Cochrane, a cashiered British naval officer who had arrived the month before. In no time, Biddle found himself on the defensive against Cochrane's views on certain saluting formalities, which Biddle declared unreasonable. Because of their divergent ideas on protocol, Cochrane went so far as to deploy his ships in menacing the *Ontario*, and a fight was expected. Biddle cleared for action and put to sea with the Chilean navy looking the other direction. He arrived in the Chesapeake Bay in April, 1819.

At the insistence of Lord Cochrane, the Chilean government addressed a complaint to the President. Monroe looked into the matter and was satisfied with Biddle's behavior, but a resolution was passed in Congress demanding an investigation. Ultimately, all the documents in the case were printed by Congress. Nothing discreditable to Biddle being produced, the Chilean complaint and the political effort to embarrass the administration with it were dropped.<sup>27</sup>

For a time Biddle was unemployed. In February, 1820, he applied for Mediterranean service as captain of the frigate *Guerrière*, but lost out to a senior officer, his friend Lewis Warrington. Next, he asked unsuccessfully for the *Constellation*.<sup>28</sup> Learning in June, 1821, that the frigate *Congress* was available, he requested his brother Nicholas' help. Nicholas Biddle pleaded the case for sea duty with President Monroe: "he feels the extreme irksomeness of comparative inactivity." Monroe expressed his desire to help, but "It is not however always in my power to do every thing that my wishes dictate, as you are well aware."<sup>29</sup> If Biddle did not get the *Congress* at this time, no one else did either for the ship was laid up at Norfolk.

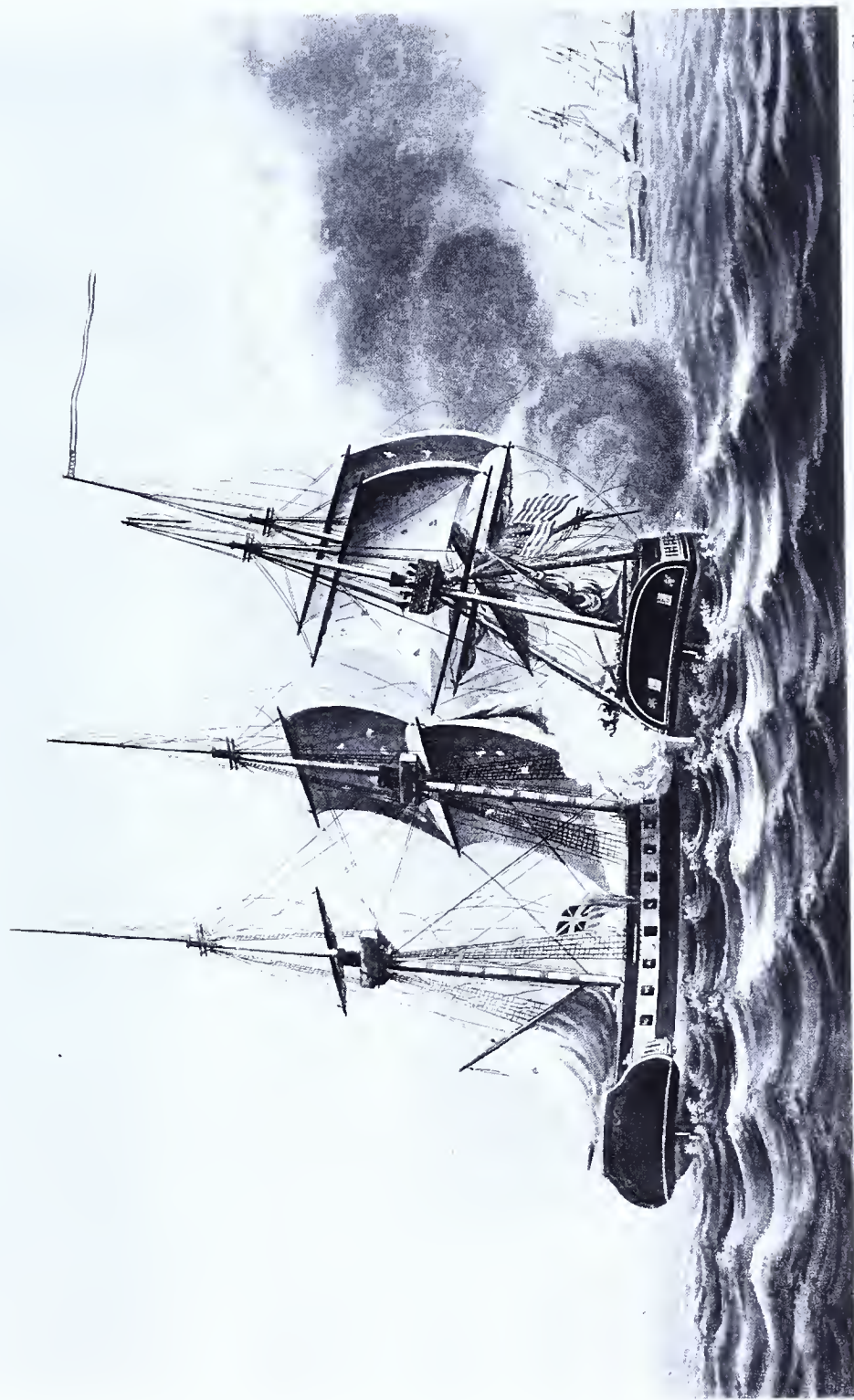
Not long afterward, in February, 1822, he was appointed to command the naval forces in the West Indies with the mission of suppressing piracy, particularly that of the Spanish privateers from Puerto Rico. He was to go first to Havana and cultivate friendly relations with Cuban authorities, and then sail for Port au Prince to solicit co-operation there against piracy. Under his command were

<sup>27</sup> Copies of Biddle's correspondence with Lord Cochrane are in the James Biddle Papers. See also *The National Gazette and Literary Register*, Apr. 22, 1820.

<sup>28</sup> James Biddle to Nicholas Biddle, June 14 [1821], James Biddle Papers, XV, document 6162.

<sup>29</sup> Nicholas Biddle to James Monroe, June 14, 1821, and James Monroe to Nicholas Biddle, Dec. 5, 1821, HSP.





Aquatint by Francis Kearney

Courtesy of The Old Print Shop

CAPTURE OF H.B.M. SLOOP OF WAR *Frolic* BY THE U.S. SLOOP OF WAR *Wasp*, OCTOBER 18, 1812



Courtesy U.S. Naval Academy Museum

CAPTAIN JAMES BIDDLE  
Attributed to Joseph Wood, 1815

the *Hornet*, *Spark*, *Enterprize*, and four schooners.<sup>30</sup> Biddle sailed from Boston on the frigate *Macedonian* with a crew of 376. At Havana, he broke off negotiations after seven of his men had died of yellow fever.<sup>31</sup> Alarmed, he put to sea on June 4, setting a course for Port au Prince, but the sickness did not abate.

From the hold of the *Macedonian* issued "impure and offensive air." Ventilation, whitewashing, fumigating, fires, letting water into the ship did nothing to correct this condition, and all supposed that the root of the evil lay in the vessel's foul state. By July 24, forty-nine men had died of fever, eighty-four were on the sick list, and Biddle decided to come home. To the Secretary of the Navy he wrote: "owing to the neglect of duty on the part of the officers of the navy yard at Boston, it is now manifest that no precautions on our part could have prevented the introduction of sickness on board . . . on the return of this ship from the Pacific [*in June, 1821*] the hold was not broken out; as respects the hold she was laid up in ordinary nearly in the condition in which she arrived from sea." Biddle called for an investigation. By the time the *Macedonian* entered Chesapeake Bay, seventy-six men were dead—ultimately, one hundred died of the fever, including the first lieutenant and many other officers.<sup>32</sup>

A few days after his return, Biddle's request for the command of the *Congress* received favorable action, and he was ordered to report to Captain Warrington, who had charge of the Norfolk Navy Yard.<sup>33</sup> Prior to the sailing of the *Congress* for the West Indies in November, Biddle went to Boston to attend the court of inquiry headed by Commodore John Rodgers, the senior Navy Commissioner.<sup>34</sup> To

<sup>30</sup> Smith Thompson to James Biddle, Mar. 26, 1822, James Biddle Papers.

<sup>31</sup> "I despise Havana most cordially, and shall leave it with no other regret than that I ever knew it, as a certain man said of his wife after he had been divorced." James Biddle to Thomas Cadwalader, May 31, 1822, HSP.

<sup>32</sup> James Biddle to the Secretary of the Navy, July 24, 1822, *Niles' Weekly Register*, Nov. 30, 1822, pages 205–206.

<sup>33</sup> James Biddle to Nicholas Biddle, Aug. 8, 1822, and Benjamin Homans to James Biddle, Aug. 20, 1822, James Biddle Papers.

<sup>34</sup> At the time Biddle called for an investigation, the officer he held guilty of criminal neglect, Isaac Hull, commandant of the Charlestown Navy Yard, was appearing before a court of inquiry on charges of neglecting his duties as commandant. *Minutes of Proceedings of the Court of Enquiry, into the official conduct of Capt. Isaac Hull, as commandant of the United States' Navy Yard, at Charlestown* (Washington, 1822); *Niles' Weekly Register*, Nov. 30, 1822, pages 206–209.



Biddle's fury, the court cleared the Boston officers from neglect of duty. This so disturbed him that perhaps it was fortunate he had another serious matter to distract his attention at this time. In addition to the Navy Yard commander at Norfolk, to whom he had been ordered to report, there was another officer, Captain Arthur Sinclair, who termed himself "Commander in Chief Afloat," although he lived ashore and the exact nature of his duties was unknown. Biddle refused to obey orders from Sinclair, who was in poor health and some of whose directions—such as his order that the infected crew of the *Macedonian* report for work on the *Congress*—almost indicate an infirm mind. As a consequence, Sinclair demanded Biddle's arrest.

President Monroe hurried off his son-in-law to Philadelphia with the bad news and the President's entreaty to Nicholas Biddle to straighten out the difficulty. Later, Sinclair expressed a willingness to refer the controversy to Commodore Bainbridge. On James Biddle's return from Boston in October, he and his brother met with Bainbridge and a letter was prepared that ended the matter to everyone's satisfaction.<sup>35</sup> Had Biddle, a man of fiery temper, not have been so distressed at the time by the *Macedonian* disaster, the misunderstanding would probably not have occurred.

His cruise in the *Congress* took him away from controversies at home, but nearly proved to be a worse experience than the *Macedonian* episode. With his ship presumably safely anchored at La Guaira, the principal port of Caracas, the capital of Venezuela, Biddle went ashore on December 20. The next day a heavy swell set in, the seas running extremely high. There were twenty-one merchant vessels in port and all were swept ashore and wrecked with many lives lost. The *Congress* parted her starboard cable and then the chain of her sheet anchor, the giant billows meanwhile rolling in so mountainously that they were crashing over her bows. She could not get out of the harbor as there was no wind; all she could do was to try to hold her position. Biddle watched her struggle for survival from the shore, returning on board as soon as he could.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35</sup> James Monroe to Nicholas Biddle, Sept. 4 and 29, 1822, and Nicholas Biddle to Monroe, Sept. 8, 12, and Oct. 12, 1822, HSP.

<sup>36</sup> Excerpts from Midshipman Samuel F. du Pont's journal kept on board the *Congress* in 1822-1823, HSP.



During part of his cruise in the West Indies, he had as his guest his brother-in-law, John G. Biddle, who sought to improve his invalid state by an ocean voyage. John's presence did much to alleviate James Biddle's anger at the "cowardice and rascality at the head of the Navy," although he continued to discharge broadsides such as his letter to General Thomas Cadwalader of February 5, 1823.<sup>37</sup>

The Secretary being determined to make the public believe that the Macedonian's sickness was caused by the climate, or at least that it was not caused by any neglect at Boston has sent me a general order not to allow any of our vessels to enter the harbour of Havana. I am not forbid to come within sight of that much abused port, because probably the Navy board think it may be approached to within gun shot without danger. Talking about danger always reminds me of a Navy Commissioner. I know a Navy Commissioner [*Commodore John Rodgers*], who never liked to come within gun shot. I mean the man who mistook a sloop for a frigate and fired into her in time of peace, & ever afterward *mistook* frigates for 74's and run away in time of war. I mean the man who resigned the command of the President when ready to sail & lying at New York, whence it is easy to get out, for the *Guerrière* then on the stocks & at Phila., whence it was impossible to get out. I mean the man who consented to accept the office of Secretary of the Navy during the War upon condition that he was allowed to retain his commission as Captain, thus in effect stipulating only to be allowed to go to sea at the return of peace. I mean the man who chased the British frigate *Belvidere* in such a manner as to make it manifest that he did not wish to come along side. I mean the man who was insulted in his own ship by *Decatur* and had not the spirit to resent it. Do you know whom I mean?

From his station in the West Indies, Biddle was ordered home for special service. Bringing the *Congress* into Hampton Roads in April, 1823, he learned that he was to take out Hugh Nelson, the newly appointed minister to Spain, and Caesar Augustus Rodney, the minister to Argentina. For the convenience of Rodney, Biddle was directed to take the *Congress* around to the Delaware, where he anchored the frigate off Wilmington. There she took on board the Rodney family's baggage, an extraordinary quantity of objects, most of them old, more than ever before had been brought on board an American man-of-war.<sup>38</sup> After as much as possible had been crammed

<sup>37</sup> James Biddle to Thomas Cadwalader, Feb. 5, 1823, HSP.

<sup>38</sup> James Biddle to Nicholas Biddle, Sept. 29 [1823], James Biddle Papers.

below decks, a large portion remained for which there was no place below. "There they lay the refuse apparently of Mr. Rodney's garret and his stable, old churns, old saddles, an old cart, an old phaeton, an old washing machine, old chairs and old pine tables. These were arranged on the quarter deck, the part of the ship which is generally the most fastidiously clean. . . ." Normally, one of the most beautiful ships in the United States Navy, the *Congress* resembled a freighter.<sup>39</sup>

At dawn on June 8, 1823, the two ministers came on board, Rodney being accompanied by his wife, her maid, nine daughters, and a son, and the *Congress* set sail for Gibraltar. Despite the presence of a Nelson and a Rodney on board, head winds made her passage across the Atlantic a long one. "I may not know what it is to hear one's own children cry," Biddle wrote his brother-in-law, "but I do know that it is not pleasant to hear the children of other people."<sup>40</sup> Evidently, one or two of the young Rodneys cried nearly all the time. Rodney himself was so ill that he was confined to his cot and the surgeon did not believe he could survive to complete the voyage. Actually, from the day the *Congress* cleared the Delaware Capes he had but one year to live.

On July 15, the frigate entered Gibraltar Bay and anchored after saluting the garrison with fifteen guns. Nelson's orders were to proceed from Gibraltar to Cadiz by land, but this he now learned was impossible as Cadiz was invested by a French army. Much against his will, because it was contrary to his orders, Biddle consented to take Nelson to Cadiz in the *Congress*. Rodney and his family were put ashore and the attempt made, but off Cadiz Biddle encountered a strong French blockading squadron and was turned back.

Returning to Gibraltar, he landed Nelson and took the Rodneys on board. It was then learned that during their stay ashore they had complained bitterly of Biddle's conduct toward them. Nelson was astonished and protested to Rodney. Later, Nelson wrote a friend of Biddle's that allowance had to be made for Rodney's wretched

<sup>39</sup> For an account of this unfortunate cruise, see Nicholas B. Wainwright, "Voyage of the Frigate Congress, 1823," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* (PMHB), LXXV (1951), 170-188. See also the log of Midshipman E. G. Tilton of the *Congress*, HSP.

<sup>40</sup> James Biddle to John G. Biddle, July 17, 1823, HSP.

health, which had produced in him "an uncommon degree of sensitiveness," and "For myself I must say that I saw nothing in the deportment of Capt. Biddle during the whole voyage which as his personal friend and the friend of his public character and reputation I could have wished to be changed in the slightest degree."<sup>41</sup> But the damage had been done. Biddle was both stunned and outraged at the reported complaints. During the passage from Gibraltar to Rio de Janeiro, he and Rodney did not speak.

The Captain's orders were to take Rodney to Montevideo, where the minister was to transship his family and possessions for Buenos Aires. Rodney, however, had long before decided to transship at Rio for reasons of economy and convenience. He was fearful of the hazards of disembarking at Montevideo, a bad anchorage during the pampero months. Accordingly, at Rio he chartered an American ship, the *Sally*, loaded her with his things, and on October 14 left the *Congress*. Biddle mustered the crew, fired a fifteen-gun salute, and stood at the gangway, where Rodney passed him without a glance.

Reports of the contretemps reached Delaware, causing its Senate and House of Representatives to adopt a resolution calling for an investigation of Biddle's conduct, which, it was incorrectly alleged, had forced Rodney to leave the ship at Rio de Janeiro, twelve hundred miles distant from his port of destination. Some mischievous boys in Wilmington burnt Captain Biddle in effigy, and much was printed in the newspapers of an injurious nature, all of it based on rumor and gossip. Caesar Augustus Rodney, who had never addressed a complaint to Biddle, never filed an official complaint either. Prior to leaving the *Congress*, he had, indeed, told one of its officers that, despite "the unfortunate misunderstanding," he would with pleasure do Biddle any service in his power.<sup>42</sup>

Biddle, always sensitive about his reputation, was, of course, furious at being slandered by the Delaware legislature and by several newspapers. His crew sympathized with him and published their "sincere thanks for your affectionate and impartial conduct towards them during the time they had the honor of being under your command."<sup>43</sup> Biddle industriously made out reports defending himself,

<sup>41</sup> Hugh Nelson to Charles J. Ingersoll, Jan. 20, 1824, *PMHB*, LXXV (1951), 175-176.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>43</sup> *The National Gazette*, Dec. 29, 1823.

but the Secretary of the Navy refused to treat the matter seriously. The Captain called on Secretary of State John Quincy Adams and showed him the astonishing list of Rodney's baggage—107 chairs, 11 bureaus, 86 boxes, 54 barrels, 26 trunks, 5 goats, etc., etc., etc.—and all Adams did was laugh until the tears rolled down his cheeks.<sup>44</sup> Fussing and fuming, Biddle never forgot this last cruise of the *Congress* (its very last, for she never put to sea again) when his cabin had smelled like a "Portuguese hospital."<sup>45</sup> Some years later, when his flagship lay at anchor at Montevideo, Biddle referred to the place as "the wretched anchorage where I was to have brought the still more wretched C. A. Rodney."<sup>46</sup>

The Captain's brother-in-law John G. Biddle, who had cruised with him in the West Indies in 1823, continued in bad health. His doctor strongly recommended a visit to the south of Europe, but Mrs. Biddle would not let her husband go without her and he would not consent to take her, as, in the event of his death, she would be left in a foreign country without a protector. To solve the dilemma, James Biddle procured a leave of absence to accompany them, and the party sailed for Leghorn in October, 1824. After a short time abroad, Biddle returned home, his brother-in-law's health appearing somewhat restored.<sup>47</sup>

"You are hereby appointed to the command of the Naval Station and Navy Yard at Philadelphia," the Secretary of the Navy informed him on May 2, 1825.<sup>48</sup> During the pleasant year that he held the Philadelphia post, he made an excursion to Pensacola in the *Hornet* to select a site for a Navy yard. His colleagues on this mission were Commodores Bainbridge and Warrington, two of the best friends he had in the service. The trio accomplished their task and on November 7, 1825, in the *John Quincy Adams*, were coming out of Pensacola with light winds and a considerable swell, when the *Adams* "refused stays, struck upon the ground, knocked off the rudder, stumped against the hard sand, and frightened all hands like the very

<sup>44</sup> James Biddle to Thomas Cadwalader, Jan. 16, 1824, James Biddle Papers.

<sup>45</sup> James Biddle to Mrs. Nicholas Biddle, Oct. 18, 1823, *ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> James Biddle to Mrs. Francis Hopkinson, Feb. 18, 1827, *ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> James Biddle to Samuel Southard, Oct. 1, 1824, and Southard to Biddle, Oct. 4, 1824, *ibid.* John G. Biddle died in Paris on Aug. 30, 1826.

<sup>48</sup> Samuel Southard to James Biddle, May 2, 1825, *ibid.*



devil. She gave some tremendous crashes. Never before was ship that escaped so near going to Davy Jones."<sup>49</sup> Biddle now found himself in a bad ship with a bad rudder and a bad crew, coming upon a bad coast at a bad season. The *Adams* made Savannah, where Bainbridge and Biddle left her and came home by other means.

Early in 1826, Biddle was offered the command of the squadron on the coast of Brazil, and accepted with alacrity.<sup>50</sup> He was now a commodore, and his flagship was, once again, the *Macedonian*, in which he sailed from Norfolk that June. During the two years he spent on the coast of South America, Brazil and Argentina were at war. Biddle's duty in aiding and protecting American commerce brought him into frequent negotiations with South American officials. This was not a congenial task. From Rio, he wrote his brother Nicholas "no one in the U. States has the least idea of the rascality and the brutality of this government and how extremely difficult it is for a man of any spirit in a diplomatic station to continue long in this country."<sup>51</sup>

After a long "imprisonment" on the *Macedonian*, the Commodore's health began to suffer. To recover from "shipishness," he went ashore at Montevideo, from where, in a typically playful letter, he informed the mother of one of his midshipmen: "Last Wednesday I gave the *Macedonian* and all on board of her to Captain Hoffman. It cost me much emotion, but emotions do not last forever; they do not last a week, for already I am tolerably composed altho this is only the fourth day. Your landswomen do not comprehend the affection which a commander feels for his frigate, and yet what affection is so *pure*. I cannot read of Napoleon's embracing with transport his *wooden* eagles at Fontainebleau without using my pocket handkerchief."<sup>52</sup> In October, 1828, he returned in the *Macedonian* to Norfolk, where he discharged her crew, furloughed her officers, and turned the vessel over to the commander of the yard. The *Macedonian* had made her last voyage. She was laid up with the *Congress* until 1835, when Commodore Warrington broke them both up, sending Biddle, as me-

<sup>49</sup> Samuel Southard to James Biddle, Sept. 17, 1825, *ibid.*; James Biddle to Thomas Cadwalader, Nov. 27, 1825, HSP.

<sup>50</sup> Samuel Southard to James Biddle, Mar. 30, 1826, James Biddle Papers.

<sup>51</sup> James Biddle to Nicholas Biddle, May 15, 1828, *ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> James Biddle to Mrs. Elwyn, Apr. 6, 1828, HSP.

mentos, a piece from each ship, that from the *Macedonian* being marked by a twenty-four pound shot from the *United States*, which had captured her in 1812.<sup>53</sup>

In 1829, Commodore Biddle was appointed to the command of the Mediterranean squadron and, accompanied by his hotheaded young cousin John Biddle Chapman, sailed from New York in August as a passenger on the frigate *Constellation*.<sup>54</sup> The voyage was a pleasant one because of the presence on board of William C. Rives, minister to France, and Louis McLane, minister to England. McLane was landed at Cowes and Rives was taken on to France, after which the *Constellation* made for Port Mahon, Minorca, where she arrived on October 18. Four days later, Biddle assumed the command of the squadron and hoisted his pennant on the frigate *Java* of forty-four guns. Before long, in company with the *Constellation* and the *Warren*, the *Java* was cruising off Tripoli.<sup>55</sup>

Duty of a purely naval nature was interrupted in December when Biddle found himself cast in a diplomatic role. Into Port Mahon came the *Ontario* and on board her was Charles Rhind, consul for Odessa, who brought with him a commission appointing Rhind, Biddle, and David Offley, consul at Smyrna, commissioners to negotiate a treaty of commerce with the Ottoman Porte, a treaty begun by Offley in 1828. At the same time came letters to the Commodore from James A. Hamilton, a son of Alexander Hamilton and a trusted henchman of Secretary of State Van Buren, explaining the delicate nature of a certain responsibility entrusted to the Commodore alone. In short, it would be necessary to bribe Turkish officials to obtain the treaty. Biddle was given \$20,000 for this purpose, for which the accounting was to be secret. He was urged to spend as high as \$150,000, if necessary.<sup>56</sup>

Biddle took Rhind to Smyrna, where they conferred with Offley, and from where Rhind went on alone to Constantinople to arrange the treaty. The presence in Constantinople of Biddle and Offley would have aroused the suspicion of the English, who would have moved to

<sup>53</sup> Lewis Warrington to James Biddle, Feb. 23, 1835, James Biddle Papers.

<sup>54</sup> Navy Department to James Biddle, July 7 and 24, 1829, *ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> James Biddle to Nicholas Biddle, Oct. 27, 1829, *ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> John Branch to James Biddle, Sept. 12, 1829, James A. Hamilton to James Biddle, Oct. 17, 1829, and Charles Rhind to James Biddle, Dec. 2, 1829, *ibid.*

prevent concessions to America, but Rhind was an unknown. After three months of negotiations, Rhind wrote his associates that he had succeeded and their signatures were now necessary. Biddle and Offley made the ten-day trip to Constantinople on horseback. The weather was unbearably hot and the inns along the way were so filthy that the Commodore often slept in the open air. A severe attack of chills and fever was the consequence.<sup>57</sup> At Constantinople, Rhind, after some delay, divulged the fact that the treaty contained a secret article authorizing the Porte to obtain materials for naval construction in the United States. Knowing that this was unacceptable to their government both Biddle and Offley refused to approve the treaty, and Biddle withheld the bribe money. After much unpleasantness with Rhind, Offley decided to sign out of fear that otherwise the Turks would retaliate by preying on American commerce. Biddle ultimately decided to go along for the same reason, although deeply embarrassed and mortified at being forced by "very peculiar circumstances" to sign what was improper in itself.<sup>58</sup> He permitted payment of about \$7,000 to "two influential persons for their assistance in the negotiations with the Porte, and, which payment was by stipulation, to be kept secret." Another \$10,000 went for the purchase of nine snuff boxes, presents to other helpful officials.<sup>59</sup> As Biddle anticipated, the Senate, when ratifying the treaty, excluded the secret article. This Turkish treaty occupied the Commodore from December 9, 1829, when he sailed from Port Mahon, until he rejoined his flagship at Malta on July 12, 1830.

Most of the rest of his time in the Mediterranean, Biddle was dangerously ill as a result of the exposure he had suffered traveling between Smyrna and Constantinople. Confined to his cot, he was often too weak to carry on his correspondence. His officers were naturally worried and someone notified the Secretary of the Navy, who granted him leave should he care to take it, but the Commodore decided to remain on duty in the frigate *Brandywine*, to which he had transferred his flag.<sup>60</sup> His responsibility was no longer so demand-

<sup>57</sup> James Biddle to Nicholas Biddle, Sept. 30, 1831, *ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> James Biddle to Nicholas Biddle, June 21, 1830, and Feb. 14, 1831, *ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, V, document 3565.

<sup>60</sup> Levi Woodbury to James Biddle, July 28, 1831, and Biddle to Woodbury, Sept. 28, 1831, *ibid.*

ing since Algiers, the most formidable of the Barbary powers, had capitulated to the French—Biddle was present when the surrender was signed—and the other piratical states had been scared into good conduct.<sup>61</sup>

When on foreign service, the Commodore habitually bought large stocks of presents for his family and friends. At Leghorn, he purchased a scagliola table decorated with painted birds and lobsters. At Smyrna, he bought perfume, at Port Mahon beaded ornaments, at Malta thirty-two flower vases and six wine coolers, at Constantinople an expensive shawl for Mrs. Nicholas Biddle, at Marseilles a 224-piece set of white and gold china, and he commissioned the American artist Horatio Greenough at Florence to make a marble bust of George Washington. He was a liberal spender, and a charitable one, for at Malta he paid \$135 to keep an old woman from going to jail.<sup>62</sup>

The morale of his squadron seems to have been good. Of its 1,107 enlisted men, 819 voluntarily stopped their allowance of spirits to receive "grog money" instead.<sup>63</sup> The officers were equally virtuous. A sailor who had previously served in the Mediterranean and who had just come out again as a replacement on the *Java* was astonished at their improved behavior. There was hardly any grog drinking or card playing, and they were so content that it was difficult to make up a sufficient officer complement for the homeward-bound *Lexington*. "When was this ever the case before in our Squadron abroad?" He had high praise for all the good Biddle had done "in thus raising the standard of our national character in this land." The sailor's letter came to the attention of Amos Kendall, who published it.<sup>64</sup> Biddle was coldly contemptuous: "I have always thought that it was extremely improper in officers to address letters of approbation to their Commander, and God help the service if sailors are permitted to do the same."<sup>65</sup> In allied vein, he replied to one of his officers:

<sup>61</sup> James Biddle to Nicholas Biddle, Aug. 7, 1830, *ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, V, document 3477, and VI, document 3722. The bust of Washington is at Andalusia.

<sup>63</sup> James Biddle to the Secretary of the Navy, Feb. 1, 1832, *National Gazette and Literary Register*, May 10, 1832.

<sup>64</sup> *Daily National Intelligencer* (Washington), Nov. 29, 1830.

<sup>65</sup> James Biddle to Nicholas Biddle, Feb. 14, 1831, James Biddle Papers.





Lithograph by Day & Haghe

Courtesy of Mrs. Clement R. Wainwright

CAPTURE OF H.B.M. SLOOP OF WAR *Penguin* BY THE U.S. SLOOP OF WAR *Hornet*, MARCH 23, 1815



Lithograph by Day & Haghe

Courtesy of Mrs. Clement R. Wainwright

H.M.S. *Cornwallis* of 74 GUNS IN CHASE OF THE U.S. SLOOP OF WAR *Hornet*, APRIL 27-30, 1815

"Sir: I have just now received your letter. I disapprove of officers receiving presents from the crew."<sup>66</sup>

On August 25, 1832, Commodore Daniel T. Patterson arrived at Mahon on the frigate *United States*. Biddle was in the harbor with the *Brandywine*, *Concord*, and *Boston*, and the *John Adams* was momentarily expected from Marseilles. His other ship, the *Constellation*, was en route to Smyrna. The following day, Biddle transferred the squadron to his old friend Patterson except for Captain Matthew C. Perry's *Concord*, in which he left for Marseilles with forty-two cases of luggage, some of it foreign purchases and the rest his personal furniture.<sup>67</sup> He also took with him five casks of wine. From Marseilles, Biddle went by land to Paris, and thence to Havre, where he booked passage on the packet *Francis I*. The voyage for himself and servant to New York cost \$285, and was a most uncomfortable one. On November 23, 1832, he reported his return to Philadelphia.<sup>68</sup>

The Commodore came home in pitiful physical condition. His doctors and family believed he was dying. In soliciting a midshipman's warrant eight months later for his nephew James S. Biddle, whom he had supported since the failure of James's father in 1826, he informed President Jackson that he had been confined to his bed ever since his return from the Mediterranean.<sup>69</sup> Attended by a physician, Dr. Thomas Dillard, and members of his family, he spent some weeks during the summer of 1833 at Cape May, where his health improved, particularly the ulcers from which he was suffering and an inflamed gland condition, but his sister wrote "Dr. Dillard thinks it will be two months before he will be able to walk."<sup>70</sup> Dr. Dillard himself reported his doubt about the Commodore recovering in the near future: "Would to God he could be restored at once to health, to the society of his friends, and to his country, which has no

<sup>66</sup> James Biddle to ———, Mar. 1, 1832, *ibid*.

<sup>67</sup> James Biddle to Daniel T. Patterson, Aug. 26, 1832, and VII, document 3904, *ibid*.; letter of Patterson dated Aug. 27, 1832, *Poulson's American Daily Advertiser*, Nov. 24, 1832.

<sup>68</sup> James Biddle to Levi Woodbury, Nov. 23, 1832, and Daniel T. Patterson to Biddle, Apr. 26, 1833, James Biddle Papers.

<sup>69</sup> James Biddle to Andrew Jackson, July 12, 1832, Correspondence of James S. Biddle, HSP.

<sup>70</sup> William S. Biddle to Mrs. Nicholas Biddle, July 24 [1833], and Mary Biddle to Nicholas Biddle, August [1833], Andalusia.

truer or abler man in it.”<sup>71</sup> The death of Commodore Bainbridge in Philadelphia on July 27 was a sad loss to Biddle and retarded his recovery.<sup>72</sup>

By the next summer, he was much improved. He visited White Sulphur Springs and journeyed through the healthful mountains of Virginia. Never a robust figure of a man, he looked frail even when in health. Standing only five feet four-and-a-half inches, he was not physically impressive, but he had presence and a natural air of command.<sup>73</sup>

In 1835, he was appointed to serve on a court-martial, but declined for reasons of health, a useful excuse as he did not want to sit in judgment on the particular naval captain to be tried.<sup>74</sup> When proffered the command of the Washington Navy Yard later in the year, he replied: “The Philadelphia station is the only shore station that would be acceptable to me. . . . While not employed afloat it would be most agreeable to me to remain with my friends in this city.”<sup>75</sup> From Philadelphia, he was abruptly summoned in 1836 by John Biddle Chapman, now married and living in Richmond. Chapman was involved in a duel and insisted that the Commodore serve as his “friend.”<sup>76</sup> Disapproving of duels, Biddle nevertheless arranged Chapman’s, which passed off without bloodshed.

After serving for several years as president of a board of examiners for the promotion of midshipmen, and on special duty with a board of three commodores who advised the Navy Department on an expedition to survey and explore the South Seas<sup>77</sup>—the Wilkes expedition of 1838–1842—Biddle received a confidential letter in July, 1838, from Secretary of the Navy James K. Paulding. Paulding mentioned complaints brought against the superintendent of the Naval Asylum at Philadelphia, the large, handsome institution de-

<sup>71</sup> Dr. Thomas Dillard to Dr. N. Chapman, Aug. 9, 1833, James Biddle Papers.

<sup>72</sup> “I perceive that the death of his friend Bainbridge has seriously affected him.” Nicholas Biddle to Daniel T. Patterson, Aug. 20, 1833, *Andalusia*.

<sup>73</sup> When released as a prisoner of war on Nov. 4, 1812, at Bermuda, the form of release gave his height and also stated that he was slender in person and had black hair and blue eyes. James Biddle Papers.

<sup>74</sup> Acting Secretary of the Navy to Dr. N. Chapman, June 4, 1835, *ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> James Biddle to Mahlon Dickerson, Sept. 18, 1835, *ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> John Biddle Chapman to James Biddle, Sept. 9, 1836, *ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> Mahlon Dickerson to James Biddle, Dec. 12, 1837, *ibid.*



signed by William Strickland and dedicated in 1833 as a home for retired sailors. Judging that the superintendent was totally unfit for his station, Paulding observed: "It appears to me that it is a situation for some officer of high rank in the Navy, who with the title of Governor, might while he gave dignity to the station, sustain no diminution of his own." He urged Biddle to take the position, at least temporarily, and put the place in order.<sup>78</sup>

Biddle accepted, moved to the Asylum, purchased a carriage and hired a coachman. His expenses were higher than usual during this period as Governor, but his annual salary of \$3,500 was sufficient to cover them. Before long, the Naval Asylum was the scene of an interesting innovation, a school for midshipmen of far more importance than its predecessors, a school of preparation, really an eight-months cram course in mathematics. The examining board for midshipmen sat at the Asylum with Biddle, who had charge of the school, as its president. From this start, Professor William Chauvenet, supported by Biddle, drew up a plan for the conversion of the course into a school in which all subjects necessary to the education of the naval officer would be taught by competent instructors. This was the germ of the Naval Academy founded at Annapolis in 1845.<sup>79</sup>

During his years ashore, Biddle studiously built up a large library. He subscribed to most of the literary reviews of the day, and bound them in book form. Literature, travels, history, and naval studies made up most of the accumulation. His catalogue, dated April 13, 1845, lists 2,329 volumes.<sup>80</sup> Thoroughly conversant with general literature, the Commodore was an authority on international law, courts-martial, and the usages of the naval service.

On April 12, 1842, he retired from the Naval Asylum, where his name is commemorated in "Biddle Hall," as Strickland's fine building is called, and moved to The Philadelphia Club, which was to be his home for the next three years.<sup>81</sup> The financial disasters of the times had wiped away his brother Nicholas' fortune as well as the Commodore's own private means. From having once been independent of his salary, his naval pay now constituted nearly his entire

<sup>78</sup> James K. Paulding to James Biddle, July 18, 1838, *ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> Park Benjamin, *The United States Naval Academy* (New York, 1900), 119-125.

<sup>80</sup> The catalogue is owned by the author.

<sup>81</sup> James Biddle memorandum book, Andalusia.



income.<sup>82</sup> James Biddle served as a trustee for Nicholas Biddle and devoted his time to the distressed family affairs, refusing to leave Philadelphia except for sea duty. An offer from the Navy Department in October, 1842, of the senior position at Boston, he declined: "no *shore* duty that would fix me permanently away from Philadelphia would be agreeable to me."<sup>83</sup> Much of his time he spent at Andalusia, Nicholas Biddle's countryseat on the Delaware, playing chess and billiards with his now invalid brother. And then, on February 27, 1844, Nicholas Biddle died.

After the death of her husband, Mrs. Nicholas Biddle went into a decline. For the recovery of her spirits, her doctors prescribed foreign travel, and a trip to Europe was planned. Although a number of her children were to go with her, the Commodore felt that he should offer his assistance. On February 20, 1845, he wrote the Secretary of the Navy: "It is not less my desire than my duty to see her safe across the Atlantic and I respectfully request your permission to accompany her upon the passage. I do not propose to remain abroad with Mrs. Biddle, but shall embark for home very shortly after arriving out." The Secretary granted him a six months' leave of absence.<sup>84</sup>

The Biddles, however, sailed without him. A month after Secretary of the Navy James Y. Mason granted the necessary leave, Mason's successor, George Bancroft, offered the Commodore the command of the East India Squadron, and James Biddle, who had never refused sea duty, accepted by return mail. The assignment was one involving special circumstances which led the Secretary to wish "the command of the Squadron in the hands of an officer distinguished alike for rank and for experience in the public service. I know of no one to whom I could entrust that high responsible command more willingly than yourself."<sup>85</sup> At this time Biddle's name was seventh on the Navy list. Official instructions for the cruise were prepared in April; in May, Biddle received his sailing orders.

Quitting his quarters at The Philadelphia Club, of which he was president, the Commodore joined his flagship, the *Columbus*, at New

<sup>82</sup> James Biddle to Maj. John Biddle, Mar. 27, 1842, James Biddle Papers.

<sup>83</sup> James Biddle to Lewis Warrington, Oct. 14, 1842, *ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> Copies of Biddle's letter of Feb. 20, 1845, to John Y. Mason and of Mason's reply, dated Feb. 22, 1845, are in Biddle's library catalogue.

<sup>85</sup> George Bancroft to James Biddle, Mar. 17, 1845, James Biddle Papers.

York, bringing with him enough clothes for the entire cruise, cabin furniture of all kinds, and six hundred dollars worth of Madeira. The *Columbus*, a seventy-four, was the only line-of-battle ship in commission. One of a rather poorly designed class of four ships, she had been launched at Washington in 1819 and carried a crew of 780 officers and men.<sup>86</sup> Her captain was T. W. Wyman, Biddle's second choice for the position.<sup>87</sup> Captain Hiram Paulding commanded the sloop of war *Vincennes*, which was to accompany the *Columbus*. The *Vincennes* had already made three cruises to the Pacific, including her most recent exploring voyage under Commander Charles Wilkes in 1838-1842. Her ship's complement came to 190.

Biddle's orders had more to do with commerce than exploration. By the Treaty of Nanking in 1842, the British had forced the Chinese to cede Hong Kong and to open to them the ports of Canton, Amoy, Fuchau, Ningpo, and Shanghai. Soon after, the Emperor of China indicated a willingness to grant similar commercial privileges to other western powers. Accordingly, in June, 1844, Caleb Cushing negotiated at Macao the Treaty of Wang Huja, which provided for the opening of the five treaty ports to Americans. Cushing hurried back to the United States with a copy of the treaty, and, upon its approval by the President and Senate, Alexander H. Everett of Boston was appointed Commissioner to China with the duty of exchanging the ratification of the treaty.<sup>88</sup> Accompanied by his wife, the diplomat came on board the *Columbus* for his passage to Canton.

Aside from his responsibility for Everett, Biddle was charged with "enlarging the bounds of our knowledge and the opportunities of commercial intercourse" in the Orient, and was to collect all the data he could of the social, political, and commercial conditions of the places he visited. Moreover, he was to bring home rare and valuable seeds and specimens of natural history. The professional advancement of his midshipmen was also to be closely attended; Biddle was

<sup>86</sup> James Biddle memorandum book, Andalusia. Although rated as a 74, the *Columbus* actually carried 80 guns. George F. Emmons, *The Navy of the United States From the Commencement, 1775 to 1853* (Washington, 1853), 86. See also Howard I. Chapelle, *The History of American Sailing Ships* (New York, 1935), 111.

<sup>87</sup> George Bancroft to James Biddle, Apr. 5, 1845, James Biddle Papers.

<sup>88</sup> Charles Oscar Paullin, *Diplomatic Negotiations of American Naval Officers, 1778-1883* (Baltimore, 1912), 197-210.

to see to it that the professor of mathematics assigned to the expedition was kept busy.<sup>89</sup>

From on board the *Columbus* at Staten Island on May 30, 1845, the Commodore rather forlornly wrote his brother Major John Biddle: "We are all embarked and ready for sea. Two steamboats are to come alongside this afternoon and tow us down and over the bar. Perhaps we may get out this afternoon. I expect to be absent about two years and a half. I had supposed that my last cruize (to the Mediterranean) was *the* last."<sup>90</sup>

The squadron left Sandy Hook several days later with the *Columbus* pulling ahead of the *Vincennes*, a dull sailer, and arriving on July 30 at Rio de Janeiro.<sup>91</sup> There she met the returning East India Squadron under Commodore Foxhall A. Parker. At Rio, Everett, whose health had broken down, gave up his mission, transferred all his authority to Biddle, and, with his party, returned home on Parker's flagship, the *Brandywine*. Thus, the Commander of the East India Squadron became also the Commissioner to China.

Biddle left Rio on August 17, taking with him six Brazilian midshipmen at the request of their government. On September 8, off the Cape of Good Hope, the *Columbus* encountered "a furious calm" and for twelve hours rolled "awfully." However, on October 14, she fetched the island of Java and anchored four days later in the Straits of Sunda, which separate Sumatra from Java. Biddle went ashore and traveled post (the carriage horses being changed every ten miles) to Batavia, where he requested the Dutch commander on that station, Rear Admiral Van den Bosch, to send an officer to pilot the squadron through the straits—out of the Indian Ocean and into the Java Sea. The admiral was most obliging; he dispatched a steam frigate to tow the *Columbus* to Batavia Roads, a distance by water of fifty miles.

On October 28, the *Columbus*, the *Vincennes* being again in company, sailed from Batavia, and, after an anxious time passing through the eastern approaches to China and into the Pacific, anchored December 24 among the Lima Islands below Macao at the

<sup>89</sup> George Bancroft to James Biddle, May 22, 1845, James Biddle Papers.

<sup>90</sup> James Biddle to Maj. John Biddle, May 30, 1845, HSP.

<sup>91</sup> James Biddle to George Bancroft, Aug. 1, 1845, James Biddle Papers. Biddle's account of this cruise is contained in volume IX of his papers, starting with document 4511.

estuary of the Canton River. According to the terms of the Treaty of Wang Huja, its ratifications had to be exchanged before January 4, 1846. With time running out, Biddle left his ship on Christmas Day. Hiring a fast boat, he arrived at Canton before daylight on December 27. Meanwhile, the *Columbus* was moved to the anchorage at the Bogue, forty miles below Canton. The *Vincennes*, which did not arrive at Macao until January 5, having lost six men from dysentery, was brought up to Whampoa, twelve miles below Canton.

Before this, the Commodore had completed the vital part of his mission. On December 31, 1845, the treaty ceremony took place at Pwantang Puntong, a country house on the river two miles above Canton. Biddle arrived in style, having hired a "flower boat" for the occasion. Accompanying him were some of the officers from the *Columbus*, Consul Paul S. Forbes, and Dr. Peter Parker, a medical missionary who served Biddle as interpreter and secretary of legation. The Emperor of China was represented by Ke Ying of the Imperial House, Governor General of Kwang Tung and Kwang Se, Director of the Board of War, Vice High Chancellor, a Vice Guardian of the Heir Apparent, Minister and Commissioner Extraordinary of the Ta Tsing Empire, and General Superintendent of the Free Trade of the Five Ports. Supporting Ke Ying were three high officials, the prefect of Canton, and a retinue of subordinates.<sup>92</sup>

While all stood solemnly, the two ratified treaties were produced, compared, and formally exchanged. Afterward, an elaborate Chinese dinner of many courses was served by innumerable servants amidst an atmosphere of jollity. French and Chinese wines were passed, the Chinese wine being served warm. Since among the Chinese it was deemed complimentary to enquire of a person his age, almost the first question Ke Ying asked Biddle was on that score, and Biddle, of course, returned the compliment—Ke Ying was sixty-five, Biddle nearly sixty-three.

The Commodore established the American legation at the foreign settlement, outside the walls of Canton, the city being closed to "barbarians." At this time, the British were trying to force the Chinese to open Canton to foreigners, and Ke Ying had gone so far as to issue a "luminous" preparatory edict facilitating this action.

<sup>92</sup> Paullin, 211–213.



However, the reaction of the people of Canton was so violent against the proposal that Biddle took steps to protect American citizens from attack. As for Ke Ying, he wrote that every time he reflected on the reaction of the Cantonese "blended mortification and perspiration burst forth." He issued another "luminous" edict calling on the people to cease their clamor.<sup>93</sup>

During the three and a half months that the Commodore ran the legation at Canton, he purchased large quantities of Chinese curiosities and works of art, most of which he intended as presents for his

*Legation of the United States  
Canton Jan'y 5. 1846*

*My dear Sir I send you the  
hammer and you take pleasure  
here, but beware of placing it in a  
drawing room with an English  
look for  
Your most devoted  
James Biddle*

family. He also paid a nine-day visit to Hong Kong, where British authorities—military, naval, and civil—vied in entertaining him. On April 15, 1846, he appointed Dr. Peter Parker chargé d'affaires and went on board the *Vincennes* at Whampoa. "I regret," he wrote Dr. Parker, "that our friend the Imperial Commissioner sent the day before I left Canton the tea and sugar and dates as a present to me. My acceptance of these things from him would not violate the Constitution of the United States, but, as misrepresentation is very much the order of the day at home, I thought it best for me not to accept, and accordingly I directed these presents to be left at your house."<sup>94</sup>

<sup>93</sup> Ke Ying's edicts are recorded in James Biddle's letter book (China), Andalusia.

<sup>94</sup> James Biddle to Dr. Peter Parker, Apr. 16, 1846, *ibid.*



The *Vincennes* dropped down stream to Macao, where the Commodore reconstructed the monument to his cousin George W. Biddle, who had died there in 1811, and then, on May 24, the squadron set forth to visit the treaty ports, the *Columbus* having recently returned from "showing her flag" at Manila, where twelve members of her crew had died of Asiatic cholera.

Biddle went first to Amoy, where he arrived on June 5. The ceremonies attending his receptions at the treaty ports were all much the same. First, the principal mandarins came on board and were entertained. Next, Biddle went ashore, where he was greeted by a three-gun salute and a band of music, and was wined and dined in the friendliest manner by the foremost people. From Amoy, the American ships proceeded to the Chusan Islands, near Shanghai, where the *Columbus* was moored as her draft was too deep to allow her to approach the shoal northern Chinese coast. In the *Vincennes*, Biddle visited Shanghai and Ningpo, rejoining the *Columbus* on July 4. "The Chinese dinners (one at each city) rather made me sick," he informed Dr. Parker, "a proof that they were good, for I defy you or Forbes to show me that a bad dinner ever made a man sick."<sup>95</sup>

The Commodore had now accomplished all that he had been called upon to do in China. His men, particularly the crew of the *Columbus* which suffered 488 cases of diarrhea shortly after the visit to Amoy, were sickly, and, according to the Surgeon of the Fleet, it was expedient to get away from the coast of China. On July 7, the ships put to sea.

Included in the Commodore's orders of May 22, 1845, was an instruction "to ascertain if the ports of Japan are accessible," and the caution that in dealing with the Japanese that he was to do nothing that might "excite a hostile feeling or a distrust of the Government of the United States." The Japanese had always been much more rigid in the exclusion of foreigners than the Chinese. The only Europeans admitted to trade with them were the Dutch at Batavia, and their trade was limited to a single port, Nagasaki, to which they were allowed to send an annual ship. No foreign ships were permitted to anchor in any Japanese port except Nagasaki.

<sup>95</sup> James Biddle to Dr. Peter Parker, July 5, 1846, *ibid.*

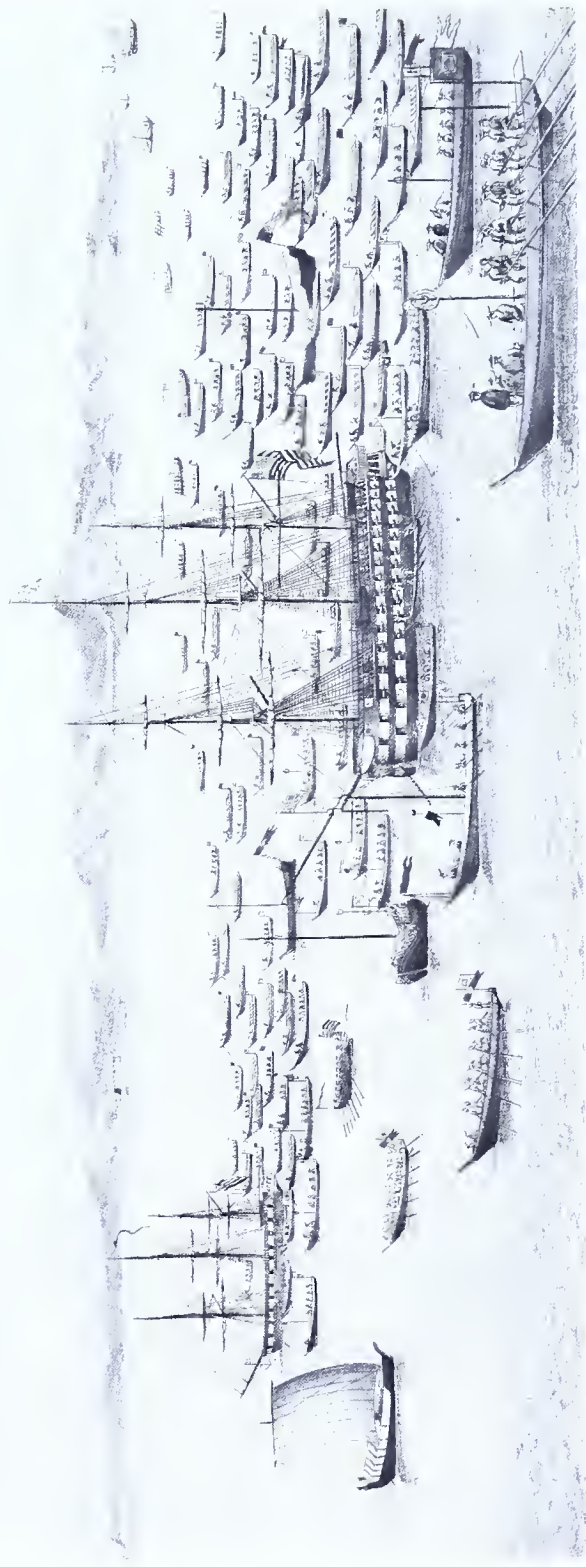
Biddle, however, decided against going there. He was sure the Dutch would be hostile to his effort to break their monopoly. Moreover, there were no officials at Nagasaki competent to treat with foreign officers. His messages would have to be sent to the seat of government at Yedo (Tokio), a journey of seven weeks. Accordingly, Biddle sailed directly for Yedo Bay, where he anchored on July 20. To a Japanese officer, who came on board the *Columbus*, Biddle handed an inquiry about the opening of ports to foreign trade and the fixing of conditions by treaty.

During their visit, the American ships were at all times surrounded by large numbers of armed Japanese boats and no American was permitted to go ashore. Biddle was told that it was the custom for foreign ships entering a Japanese port to land their guns, muskets, and swords, but he refused to do so.

In nearly all respects, the Japanese appeared to be friendly. Great numbers of them were allowed to inspect the American vessels, and the Japanese authorities watered and provisioned the squadron without making any charge. After the ships had been a week in Yedo Bay, a junk approached carrying an officer with a suite of eight persons and the government's reply to Biddle's letter. The Japanese officer insisted that Biddle come on board the junk to receive the letter, but Biddle refused and the Japanese party then agreed to deliver it on the *Columbus*. Unfortunately, Biddle then had a change of heart. To gratify the Japanese, he decided to go to the junk, and sent a message to that effect which was either not received or not understood. When Biddle in full uniform came alongside the junk in his ship's boat, he was not expected, and when he attempted to step on board a Japanese soldier gave him a blow or push that threw him back into his boat.<sup>96</sup>

The Commodore called out to the interpreter on the Japanese vessel to have the man seized and then returned to the *Columbus*, followed by the interpreter and a number of Japanese officers who expressed deep regret at the incident and who promised to punish the soldier severely. They also presented the official letter, a positive refusal to open Japanese ports to trade, and a mandate to the Americans to depart and never return again. On July 29, Biddle ordered

<sup>96</sup> Paullin, 227-230.



Lithograph by Wagner & McGuigan

THE U.S.S. *Columbus* AND *Vincennes* IN JAPAN

The Historical Society of Pennsylvania



Lithograph by Wagner & McGuigan

The Historical Society of Pennsylvania

DEPARTURE OF THE U.S.S. *Columbus* AND *Vincennes*

From Jeddo Bay, July 29, 1846



the anchors weighed. Winds were light, and so, to hasten his departure, several hundred native boats towed the ships to sea. The next day, the Commodore made the signal to the *Vincennes* to part company, the *Vincennes* returning to China and the *Columbus* sailing for Honolulu.

Unable to accomplish anything in Japan, Biddle was, nevertheless, the first American naval officer to anchor a fleet in its waters and to hold talks with its officials. Others were to profit by his experiences. His official report to the Secretary of the Navy is endorsed "although he did not succeed in inducing the Japanese to open their ports and establish commercial relations with us, his prudent and judicious conduct while at Yedo merit the strong approbation of this Department."<sup>97</sup>

On his arrival at Honolulu in September, Biddle learned of the Mexican War. At this time, virtually the entire Navy, less the East India Squadron, was under the command of two of his former lieutenants. Commodore David Conner, who had served on the *Hornet* and the *Ontario*, had the Home Squadron in the West Indies and Gulf service, while Commodore John D. Sloat, Biddle's first officer on the *Congress*, had the Pacific Squadron on the coast of Mexico.<sup>98</sup> In June, 1846, Sloat, while off the port of Mazatlán, received orders to take possession of California. Towering alongside his ship lay Admiral Sir George Seymour's *Collingwood* of eighty guns. Only the *Columbus* was capable of standing up against the *Collingwood* should Sir George try to take California for England or otherwise interfere. Sloat promptly wrote a personal letter to Biddle, "my oldest and most intimate friend in the Navy," urging him to come to California as there was danger of a rupture with Great Britain, but Biddle never received this plea.<sup>99</sup>

He knew, however, that the *Columbus* would be needed in the war, and prepared to sail to the west coast of South America "and thus place myself in the way of receiving any orders the government might see fit to send me." Briefly detained at Honolulu, he took the opportunity to write to his nephew James S. Biddle.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 232. The account of Biddle's visit to Japan is drawn mainly from his letter of July 31, 1846, to Bancroft. National Archives. The endorsement is on Biddle's letter of Sept. 16, 1846, to Bancroft, *ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> Justin H. Smith, *The War with Mexico* (New York, 1919), II, 189.

<sup>99</sup> John D. Sloat to Richard Biddle, Jan. 15, 1847, Andalusia.



We let go our anchor here on the 9th instant. In our whole run across the Pacific from Japan, we had no westerly wind, altho' we were forced to go as far north as the latitude of  $43^{\circ}$ . Our passage therefore was not short, neither was it long. What then was it? It was 40 days from land to land. My chief satisfaction at reaching these islands comes from the consideration of being so far on my way to the U. States. I am upon my last cruize—my very last—and when I return home and get surveyed and condemned as unseaworthy the family will depend upon you for all its naval honors. How do you feel about the shoulders?

I am beginning to wonder where and how I shall locate myself in Philadelphia. I think of mooring ship at the Washington Hotel in Chesnut Street above 7th. I shall require two cabins upon one deck, and then I shall not turn out, let what will come to pass. It may blow and be d—d, the anchor may drag and be d—d, the cable may part and be d—d. Let those look out who have the watch on deck. I shall keep the watch below, and sleep on. I shall be just like the old Negro in Jamaica, "the more massa call me, the more I won't come."

I am waiting here patiently for my people to be refreshed, of which they stood much in need after exposure to the climate of China and Japan. As soon as the surgeon says the word I shall weigh and go ahead, touching at Tahiti on my way to Valparaiso. I was at Valparaiso 28 years ago, and I would not go there again if I could help it.

I find here a married lady who claims me as her relative on the ground that she is related to my brother John's wife. I have admitted her claim as she is young and handsome.<sup>100</sup>

The Commodore did not bother to inform his nephew that the day before he had been presented to His Hawaiian Majesty, but on November 10, 1846, he felt obliged to continue, in a sense, his letter by writing another one on the same sheet of paper to his niece Meta, who had married James S. Biddle, her first cousin.

As I have told your husband the day of our reaching Honolulu, it seems but fair that I should tell you the day of our leaving it, the 28th of September was the happy day.

I am on my way to Valparaiso. Where I shall go next will depend upon the information I may receive at Valparaiso of the unjust war we have provoked with Mexico. I hope to hear that it is at an end. It would be disreputable in us not to make it short, tho' I think our countrymen will find the capture of the city of Mexico not so easy as they imagine. It will cost us a good many lives. One of the bad results of this war will be that

<sup>100</sup> James Biddle to James S. Biddle, Sept. 20, 1846, HSP.

the man who plants our flag upon the walls of the city of Mexico will be our next President, tho' he be as unfit as was Jackson. . . .

As you have twice crossed the Atlantic you must know something. I have been bred to the sea, and the sea has been *bread* to me, and very good bread it has been, nevertheless—shall I confess it—I have become heartily tired of the sea, and all its anxieties and all its discomforts. I am aware that life at sea is just what it was *forty-six* years ago, when I first knew and liked it, and that the change is not in it but in me. Does this mend the matter? Not at all. When I get home you need not ask me to go to Andalusia *by water*. I shall go by land and not look towards the river while there. Dear Andalusia! I hope it has not been deserted & neglected this summer. I hope you are all there now and will remain far into the winter. The women ought to prefer the country to the town.

I presume you are a good deal with my nephew James S. Biddle of the Navy and often at a loss for something to say to him. Well, I will furnish you with something that will surprize him. Tell him that altho' now upwards of 17 months abroad, we have not yet hanged at the yard arm a midshipman, a boatswain's mate, nor even a seaman. My paper is thro'.<sup>101</sup>

The *Columbus* arrived at Valparaiso on December 2, meeting Commodore W. B. Shubrick's *Independence* coming into harbor at the same time. The *Independence* was originally a seventy-four, a sister ship of the *Columbus*, but in 1836 she was cut down by removing her spar deck. The result was a class of ship known as a "razee," a very heavy frigate. Shubrick brought with him a letter from Secretary Bancroft stating "if Commodore Biddle is on the coast he will at present command the Pacific Squadron." This was not much in the way of orders, but Biddle received a message from the chargé d'affaires at Lima that he had important dispatches for him.<sup>102</sup> Accordingly, the *Columbus* sailed for Callao, and Shubrick, under Biddle's orders, left for Monterey, where Biddle would later join him. Not wishing to embarrass the government of Brazil by the presence of six of its midshipmen on an American naval vessel engaged in war with Mexico, he transferred them to a ship bound for Rio de Janeiro. They arrived home safely and were instantly promoted. "You and your officers," the American Minister at Rio wrote Biddle, "have made everlasting friends among the future naval heroes of Brazil!"<sup>103</sup>

<sup>101</sup> James Biddle to Mrs. James S. Biddle, Nov. 10, 1846, *ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> James Biddle to George Bancroft, Dec. 14, 1846, National Archives.

<sup>103</sup> Henry A. Wise to James Biddle, Apr. 16, 1847, James Biddle Papers.

At Callao, Biddle received his instructions ordering him to California. In a subsequent letter, the Secretary wrote: "The time of your continuance on the West Coast will be determined by yourself upon a full knowledge of the condition of our affairs in that region." Biddle also learned that Commodore B. F. Stockton, who had succeeded Sloat in command of the Pacific Squadron, had issued on August 19 a proclamation declaring the entire west coast of Mexico to be under blockade, a paper blockade that could not possibly be enforced. Disapproving of this action, Biddle canceled Stockton's proclamation in favor of an actual blockade of the two main Mexican ports—Mazatlán and Guaymas. In so doing, he anticipated orders from Washington, where Stockton's proclamation had been disallowed.<sup>104</sup>

The Commodore established his headquarters at Monterey in April, 1847, and kept the *Columbus* relatively inactive because of the sickness the crew had suffered. It did not seem wise to expose the men to the coast of Mexico. To establish the blockade, he sent off Commodore Shubrick and a squadron of ships. In his instructions to Shubrick, Biddle cautioned: "During the war between the United States and Great Britain, our enemy at the city of Washington made war upon public edifices devoted exclusively to civil purposes, and upon the public library, and within the waters of the Chesapeake carried on a plundering and burning system of warfare against non-combatants and their families. I mention this as an example to be carefully shunned by us in all our hostilities against Mexico. By imitating such an example, we should certainly bring disgrace upon our country and probably prolong the war. . . . The sickly season on the coast of Mexico commences in June. The continuance of the blockade is important but the health of your people is more important. When therefore the sickly season arrives, I wish the *Independence* and *Cyane* to leave the coast and come here."<sup>105</sup>

His other Commodore, Stockton, the previous commander of the Pacific squadron and a man of no noticeable modesty, had fallen into quarrels with both Shubrick, who had relieved him before Biddle's

<sup>104</sup> James Biddle to George Bancroft, Jan. 5, 1847, and to John Y. Mason, May 1, 1847, National Archives.

<sup>105</sup> James Biddle to W. B. Shubrick, Apr. 17, 1847, *ibid.*

arrival, and the army commander, General Stephen Watts Kearny. In appealing in a "Private and Confidential" letter to Biddle to favor his position against Shubrick and Kearny, Stockton had the want of taste to write: "My claims upon your regard, or any trouble this may cause you, arises principally from my friendship for, and steady support under all circumstances of your late brother Nicholas, to whom as you know I was always a firm and unflinching friend."<sup>106</sup>

Convinced by mid-summer that the presence of the *Columbus* was no longer essential to guarantee possession of California and that he could now exercise his option to return home, Biddle transferred the command of the Pacific Squadron to Commodore Shubrick at San Francisco on July 19, 1847,<sup>107</sup> and left there six days later. He touched at Valparaíso in October, rounded the Horn, and arrived at Rio de Janeiro on December 23.

While at sea, an amateur artist on his ship, E. C. Young, prepared for him a book of sketches illustrating the Commodore's career and filled out with unrelated pictures copied from Commander Charles Wilkes's *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition during the years 1838, 1839, 1840, 1841, 1842*. As an element of humor, the artist never showed the Commodore's face. Biddle, in the many pictures in which he appears, is always looking the other direction. In one case, he is even standing behind a tree and in another, entitled "Com Biddle being burnt in effigy by the great state of Delaware, Wilmington, 1824," the page is otherwise a blank. In all, the artist drew eighty wash drawings, two of them in color. The left hand pages were left blank except for several on which were copied orders received by Biddle on his last, climactic cruise. The Commodore intended the book as a present for his niece Adele, to whom he wrote:

The likenesses in the picture book, pages 87, 89, 91 [78, 79, 80], I think you will like. The Commissioner to China resembles the Commander of the East India Squadron, and both resemble the Commander of the Pacific Squadron. Do you ask how this happened? The resemblance between the two first was caused by the sickness of Mr. Everett; their resemblance to

<sup>106</sup> B. F. Stockton to James Biddle, Mar. 17, 1847, James Biddle Papers.

<sup>107</sup> W. B. Shubrick to James Biddle, July 20, 1847, *ibid.*



the last was owing to the hard heartedness of the Secretary of the Navy. Impossible, you exclaim. 'Tis as true as Bishop Onderdonk.<sup>108</sup>

After arriving at Rio Janeiro in 1845, Mr. Everett, by the advice of his medical attendants, abandoned his mission to China, and transferred its duties to the Commander of the East India Squadron. Sixteen months thereafter this same East India Commander on his way home from Japan received a paper bullet from the Secretary of the Navy, and this bullet changed both his destination and his designation. He was no longer homeward bound! He was no longer in command of the Squadron from the East Indies. He was commanding the Pacific Squadron, and steering not for Cape Horn but for California. Verily the pen is stronger than the 32 pounder.

Now what I desire you to tell me is this: do you perceive in the three portraits or either of them any likeness to a young man whom you must have seen often at Andalusia and elsewhere before you went to Europe. He, the young man, left America shortly after you left it, and has not since returned. He was told at Washington that his cruize would not exceed 18 months. His cruize has already exceeded 30 months, and yet its end is not. Now when you went to Europe, your whole stay abroad was short of eight months, and Craig [*Adele's brother*] wrote to me that you growled considerably at the length of it. Compare yourself in this respect with the Commissioner to China, the East India Commander, or the Pacific Commander, and blush at having growled at all. Man is a growling, discontented animal, women are always patient and uncomplaining.<sup>109</sup>

After two weeks at Rio, the *Columbus* sailed on January 7, 1848, bound for Norfolk and the end of her cruise. It was on this final part of her voyage that the Commodore composed his biographical letter to his nephew James.<sup>110</sup>

Since the first time I put to sea, I have been to England, France, Spain, Portugal, Italy, and Turkey in Europe—Tunis, Algiers, Tripoli, and Turkey in Asia—Sicily, Malta, Gibraltar, Majorca, and Minorca—Columbia, Brasil, Banda Oriental, Chili, Peru, California, Oregon, and the Sandwich

<sup>108</sup> Henry Ustick Onderdonk became Protestant Episcopal Bishop of Pennsylvania in 1836. In 1844, he wrote to the House of Bishops confessing his habitual abuse of intoxicating liquor, and tendering his resignation, which was accepted. *Dictionary of American Biography* (New York, 1934), XIV, 40.

<sup>109</sup> James Biddle to Adele Biddle, Dec. 5, 1847, Henry Carvill Lewis.

<sup>110</sup> James Biddle to James S. Biddle, Feb. 12, 1848, HSP.



islands—China and Japan—English, Dutch, and Portuguese possessions in the East Indies—English, French, Dutch, Spanish, Swedish, and Danish islands in the West Indies, besides the black island of St. Domingo. To many of these places I have been oftener than once.

I have been once round the world, five times round the Cape of Good Hope, three times round Cape Horn, and crossed the Equator twenty times. I have commanded on all the naval stations, the Mediterranean, the Brazils, the Pacific, the East Indies, and the West Indies. I signed the treaty with Turkey, exchanged the treaty with China, had authority to conclude a treaty with Japan. During the war with Great Britain, I was in two actions, both of them successful. During the war with Tripoli, I was upwards of 19 months a prisoner. At this moment, I am the only officer afloat who was a commanding officer in the War of 1812. I was made a Commander when 13 years in the Navy and *Post* when 15 years.

I have been 48 years in the Navy, twice a prisoner of war, once severely wounded in action, never fought a duel, never was tried by a court martial, never drank a glass of grog. At the time I entered the Navy, grog drinking was almost universal.

During the war (not this wretched Mexican war), I was promoted out of my turn. I have received two medals from the government of the United States, a sword from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, a piece of plate from some of my personal friends in Philadelphia, a public dinner from some of the citizens of New York, was slandered by the Legislature of Delaware, and burnt in effigy by the people of Wilmington.

In 1807 I went to China in a merchant ship as 1st officer. In July 1811 I went to Lisbon as supercargo. In December 1811, I went to Paris as bearer of dispatches. In 1824 I went passenger to Italy with my brother-in-law who was sent abroad for his health. There is but one country in the world that I wish to see again, and that country is my own. I am now on my way to it. Shall I ever leave it again? I think not, certainly not willingly.

The *Columbus* arrived at Hampton Roads early in March, 1848, and was laid up “in ordinary” at the Norfolk Navy Yard; there she remained until 1861, when she was scuttled and sunk to prevent her falling into the hands of the Confederates.<sup>111</sup> Accompanied by a naval surgeon, Commodore Biddle came home. Worn out from his travels, and in failing health, he wrote his will, bequeathing half of his \$50,000 fortune to his sister, Mrs. Hopkinson, and the other half to his sister-in-law, Mrs. Nicholas Biddle. On October 1, 1848, scarcely

<sup>111</sup> Paullin, 224.

six months later, he died at his residence in Portico Row, on Spruce Street above Ninth.

A few days later, the mourners, "a large concourse of citizens," gathered at the house of Mrs. Nicholas Biddle on Pine Street, where his body had been taken. Also present were detachments of cavalry, artillery, and infantry, as well as a regimental band, officers of the army, a marine honor guard, and naval pall bearers including two commodores. And so the procession set forth, eight clergymen preceding a sailor who carried the Commodore's broad pennant in front of the coffin which rested on a bier upon the shoulders of other sailors. With ceremonies, religious and military, James Biddle's remains were lowered into his father's vault at Christ Church burial ground.<sup>112</sup>

Philadelphians were aware that they had lost "a worthy gentleman & a distinguished officer," to quote the normally critical diarist, Sidney George Fisher.<sup>113</sup> Henry Simpson observed in his sketch of Biddle, published in 1859 in *The Lives of Eminent Philadelphians Now Deceased*: "No man was more exemplary in all the private relations of life. He never married, and the affection of his warm and generous nature was bestowed upon a large circle of relatives and friends. His manners were marked by scrupulous refinement and delicacy. He was slight in person, and it was by the force of an indomitable spirit that he surmounted hardships and difficulties. His temperament was quick and impulsive, but controlled by a strong sense of justice, and a careful regard for the rights of others." In final tribute, Simpson wrote: "Few men have more completely fulfilled the duties of their station in life; and he may be with truth cited as one of the best examples of the American naval officer."

*Historical Society of Pennsylvania*    NICHOLAS B. WAINWRIGHT

<sup>112</sup> *The Pennsylvanian*, Oct. 3 and 6, 1848.

<sup>113</sup> The Diary of Sidney George Fisher, Oct. 19, 1848, HSP.

### *The Sketch Book*

As previously mentioned, Commodore Biddle had the artist E. C. Young prepare a book of drawings, many of which were based on episodes in the Commodore's career. This book he gave to his niece Adele in 1848. Inside its cover is her bookplate and also her inscription: "To Adele Biddle Thomas from her Aunt Adele Biddle, March 19, 1903." Upon the death of Mrs. Thomas in 1940, the volume was inherited by her niece, Mrs. Henry Carvill Lewis, the former Adele Biddle Dixon. Since Mrs. Lewis' death it has been the property of her husband, who has very kindly consented to the reproduction on the following pages of forty-one of its eighty drawings.

The artist evidently copied them into the book from pencil sketches which he made in advance. Some of these have survived and four of them were used as illustrations in this *Magazine* in 1951. The present publication is the first reproduction of the drawings from their finished state. All of the originals were titled in ink by Young. For technical reasons, most of these titles have been set in type as it was not practical to photograph them. However, to provide some measure of their flavor, the few titles which could be readily photographed are reproduced as they appear in the book.



MIDSHIPMEN JAMES AND EDWARD BIDDLE JOINING THE FRIGATE *President* AT NEW YORK, JULY, 1800.

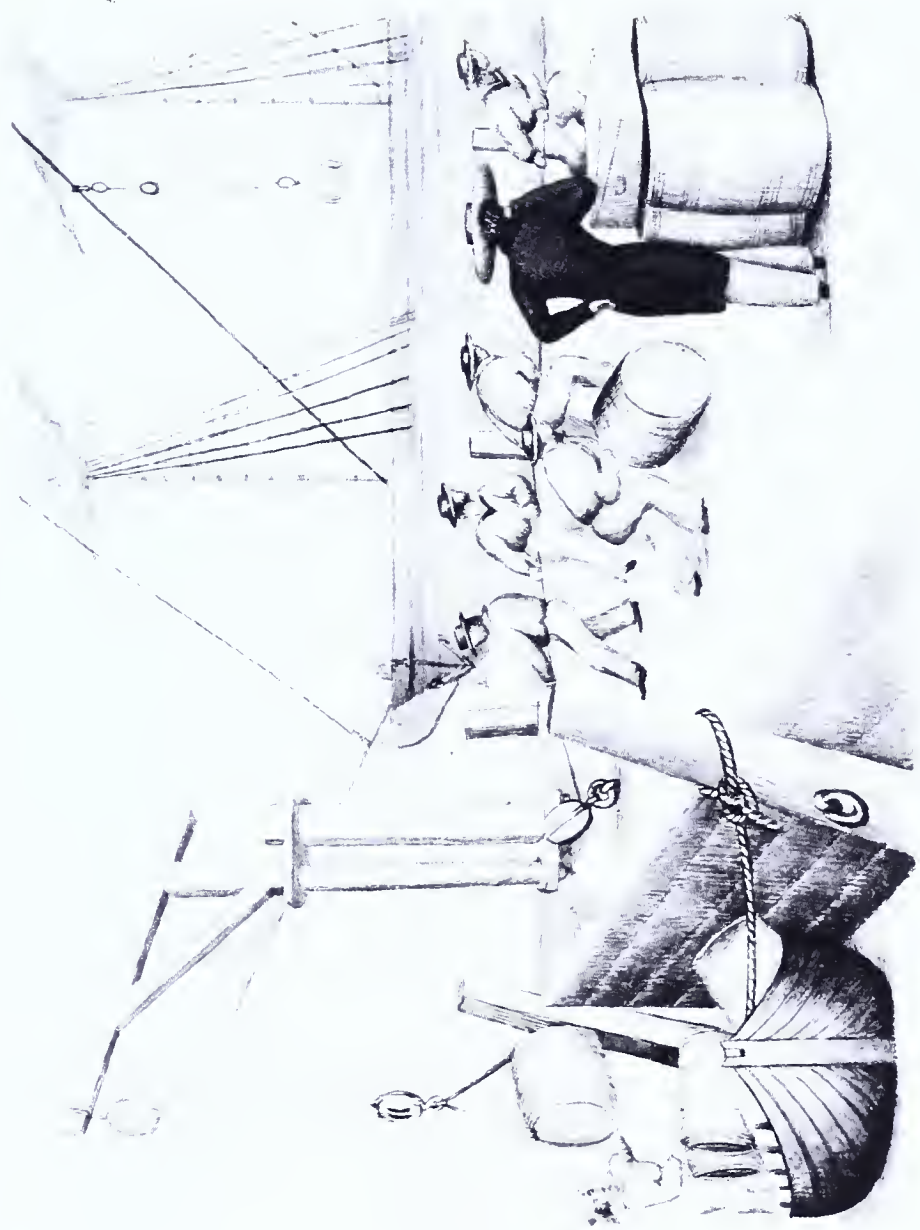


MIDSHIPMAN BIDDLE IN TRIPOLI PRISON 1803-4-5.





LT. BIDDLE, 1ST OFFICER OF A MERCHANT SHIP, WHAMPOA, 1807.



LT. BIDDLE, SUPERCARGO TO LISBON, 1811.



L.T. BIDDLE, BEARER OF DISPATCHES TO FRANCE, 1812.



LT. BIDDLE, A PRISONER IN BERMUDA, 1812.



CAPTAIN BIDDLE OFF CAPE HORN, DEC., 1817.





COMMODORE, WEST INDIA SQUADRON, 1822-3.

95

60

COMMODORE, BRAZIL SQUADRON, 1826-7-8.





COMMODORE, MEDITERRANEAN SQUADRON, 1829-30-31-32.

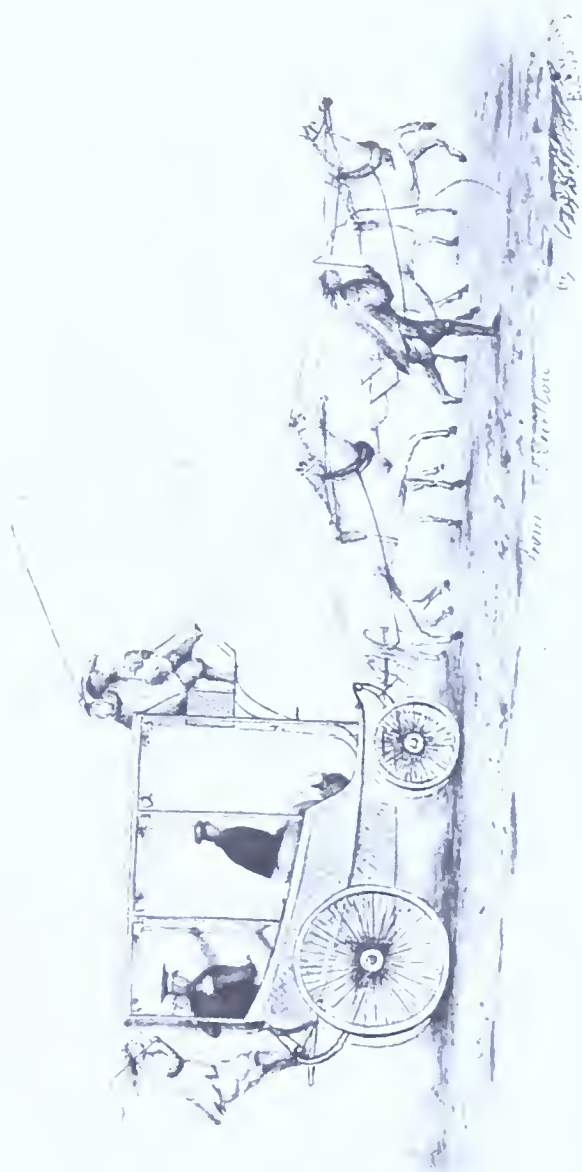


COMMISSIONER TO TURKEY, 1830.

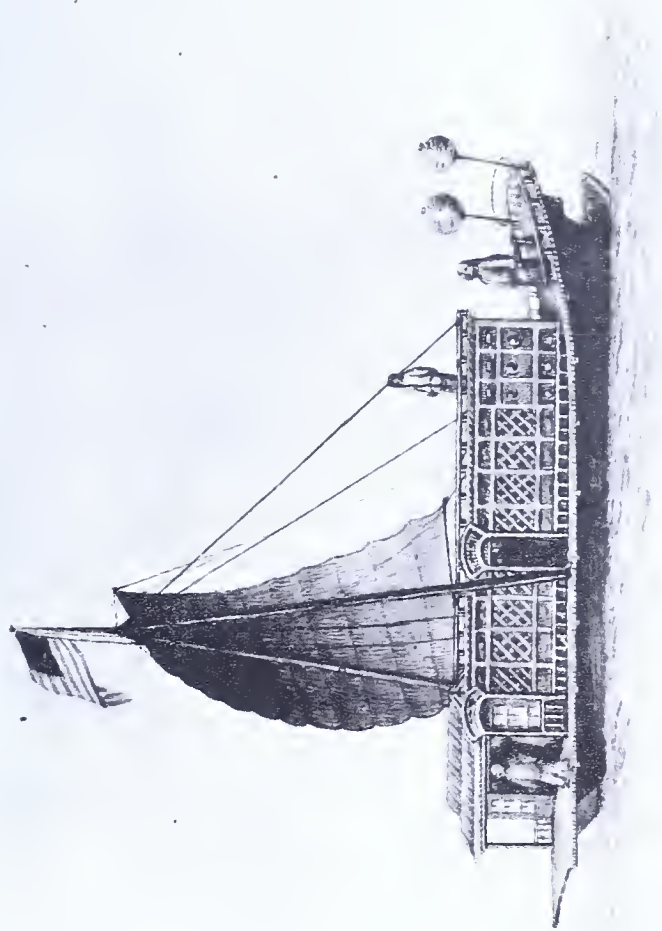


COM. BIDDLE SAILING FROM NEW YORK, JUNE 4, 1845.

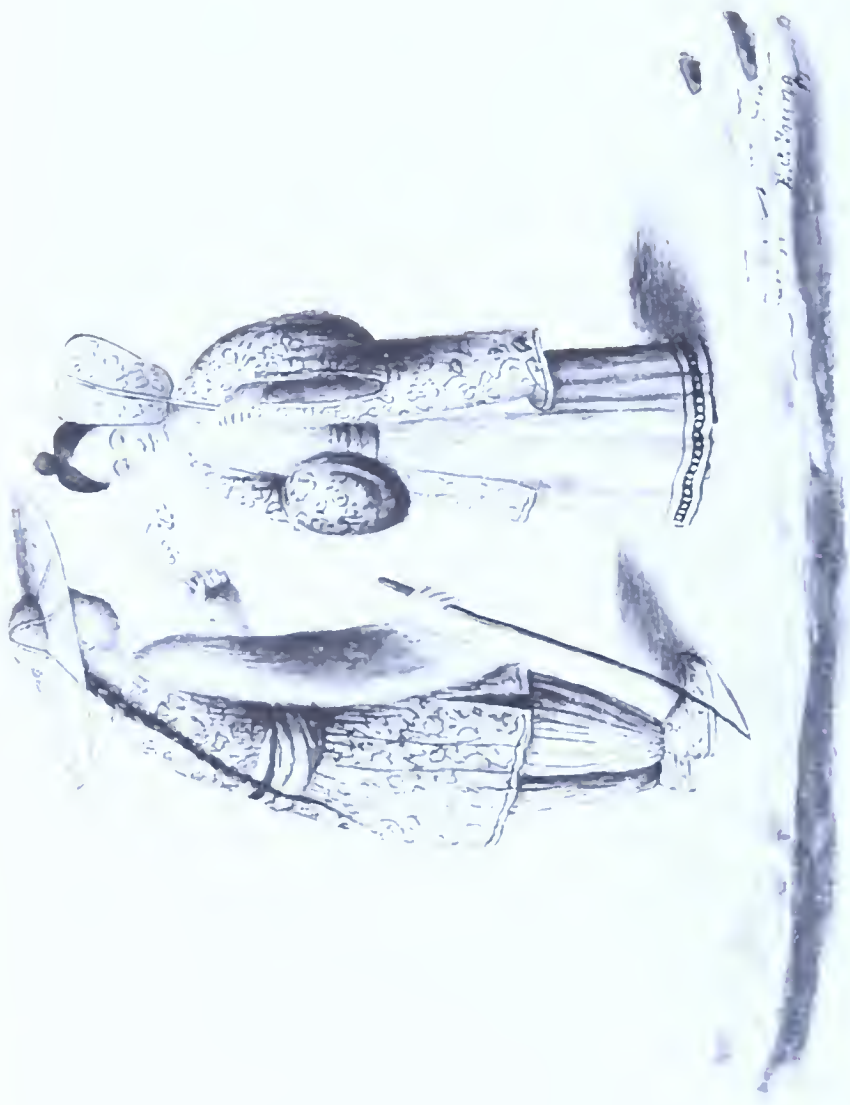




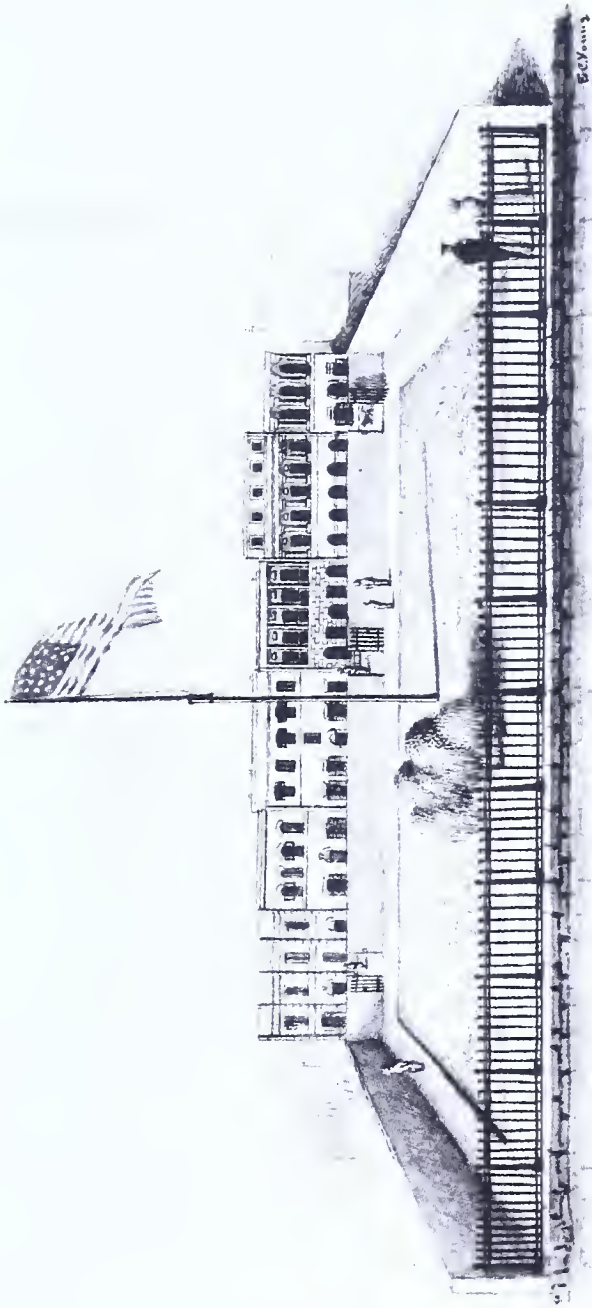
*Com: Biddle travelling post to Batavia.  
October 20, 1845.*



COM. BIDDLE IN CHINA, GOING TO EXCHANGE THE TREATY WITH THE CHINESE IMPERIAL COMMISSIONER,  
DEC. 31, 1845.



CHINESE.



*Com: Biddle, at Canton,  
Feb<sup>y</sup> 22, 1846.*



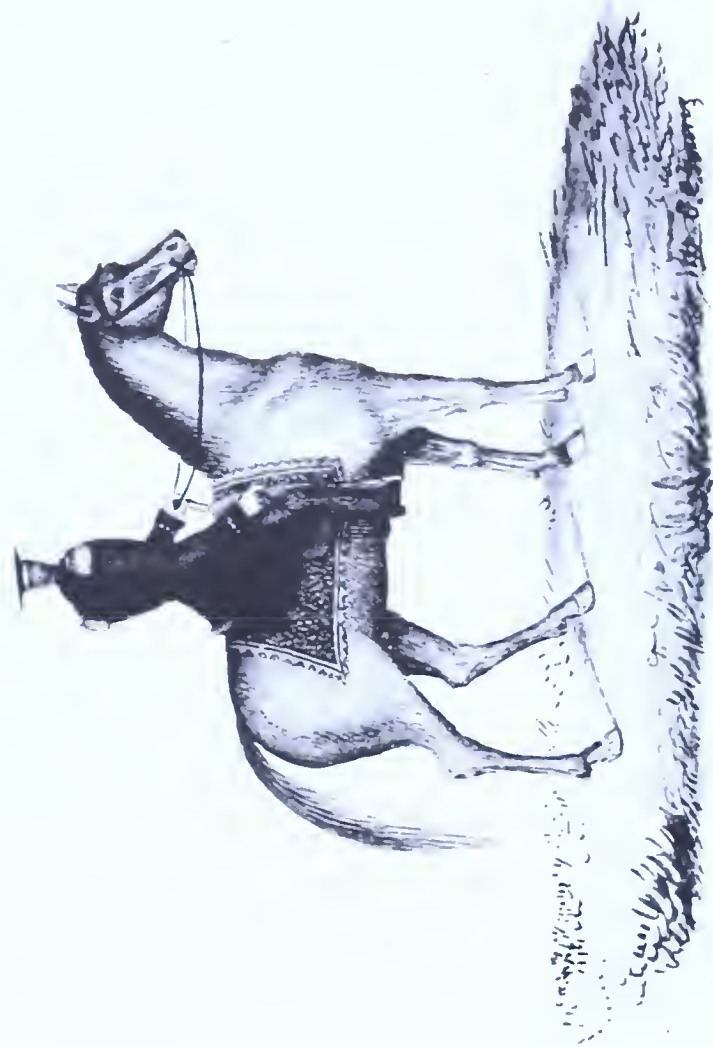
*Vàn-ta-qín.*





道光

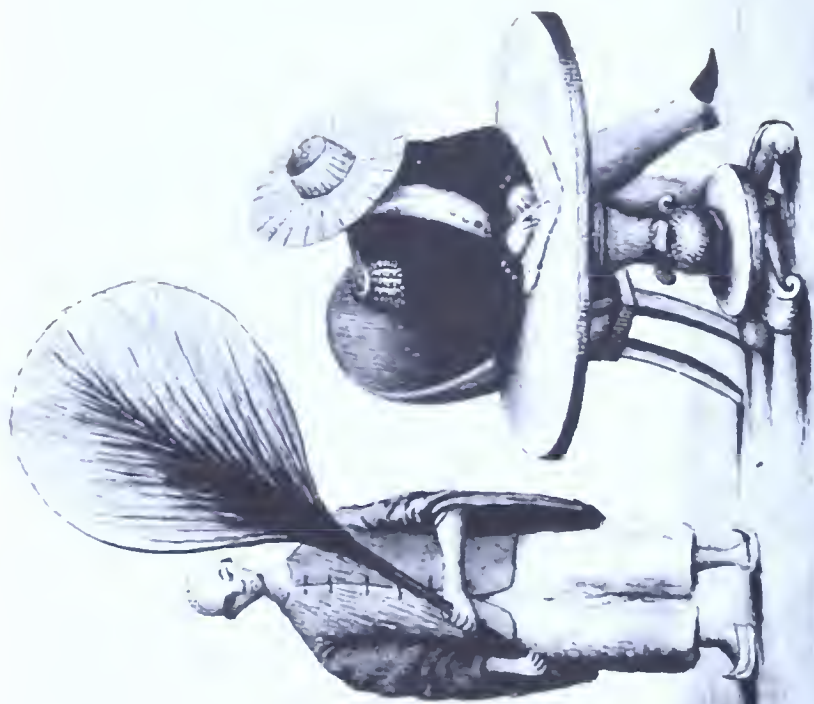
THE PRESENT EMPEROR OF CHINA.  
He was born in 1782; ascended the throne in 1820.



COM. BIDDLE AT HONG KONG, MARCH 19, 1846.

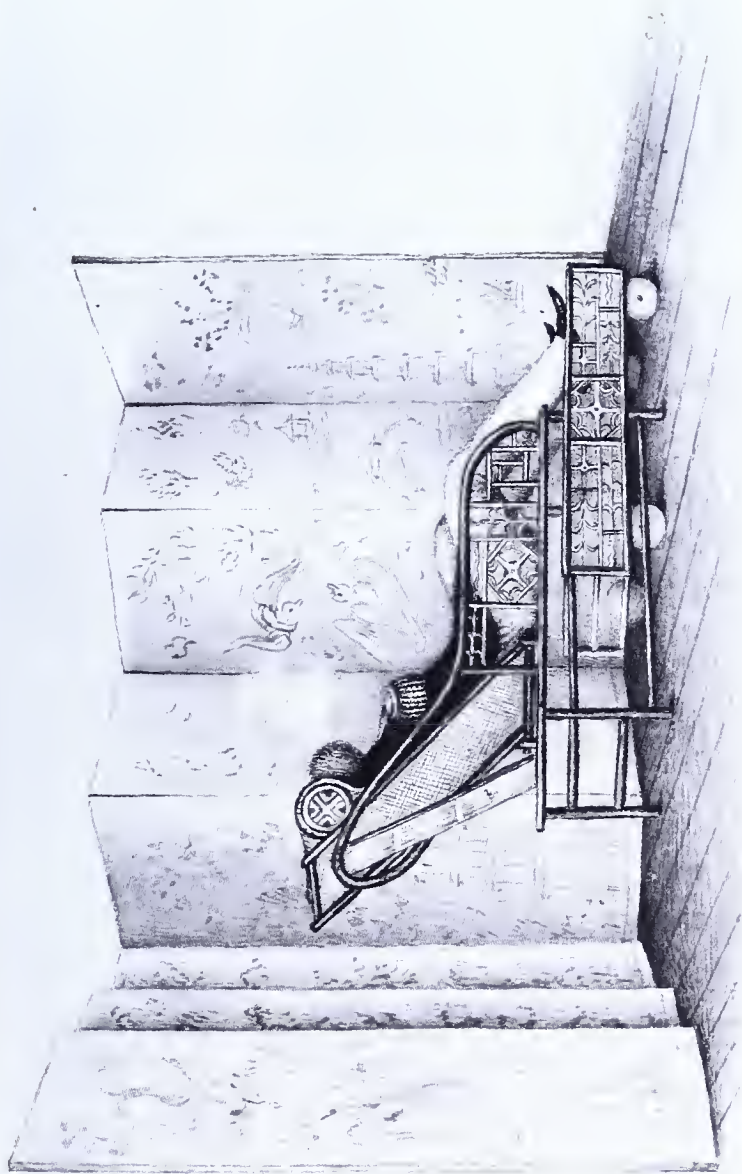


COM. BIDDLE AT MACAO, APRIL 27, 1846.

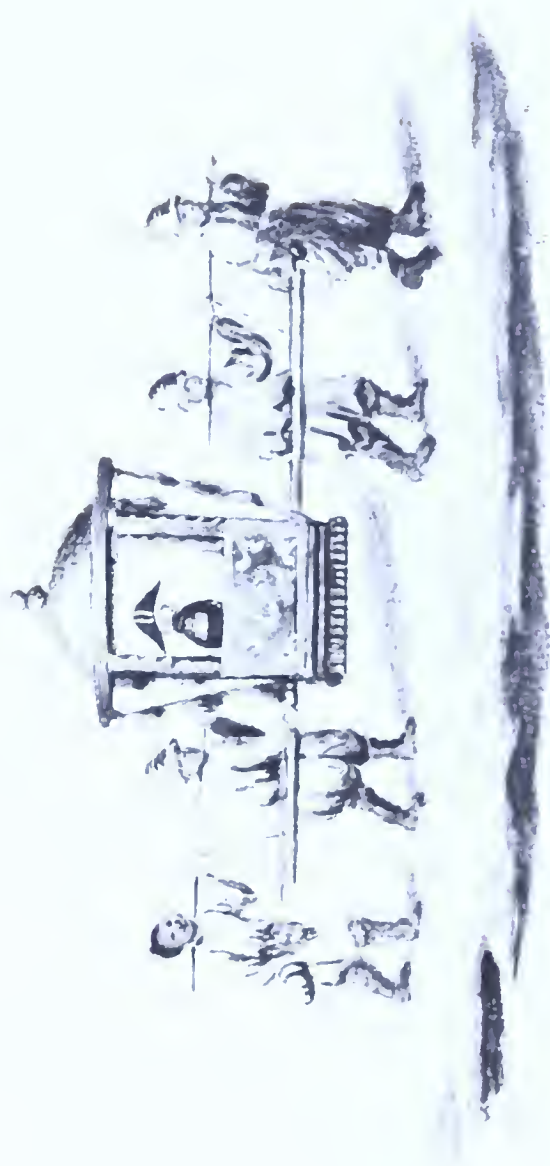


COM. BIDDLE AT AMOY, JUNE 6, 1846.

COM. BIDDLE AT SHANGHAI, JUNE 21, 1846.





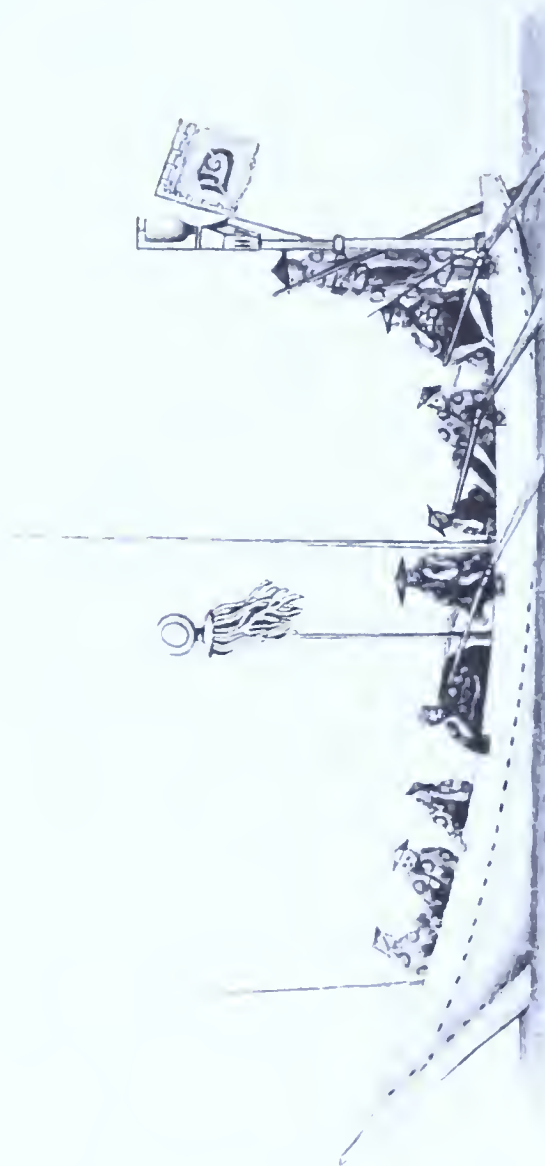


COMMODORE BIDDLE AT NINGPO, JULY 1, 1846.



*Com: Biddle in Japan,  
July 30, 1840.*

*Japanese Guard Boat.*



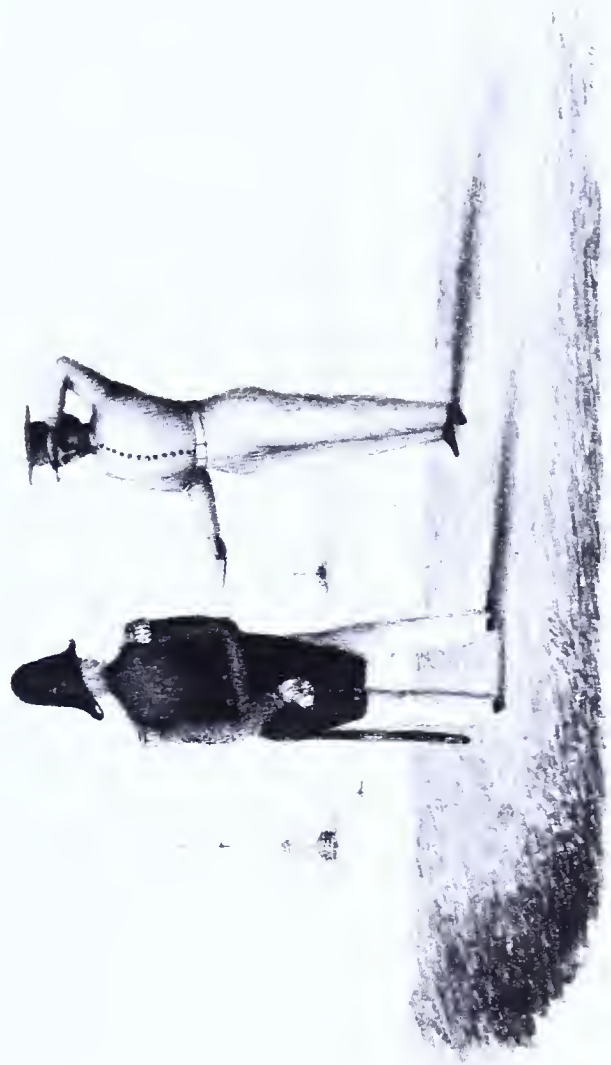


*Japanese conversing.*

*The Commissioner to China,*







*Commodore, East India Squadron,  
1845-6.*



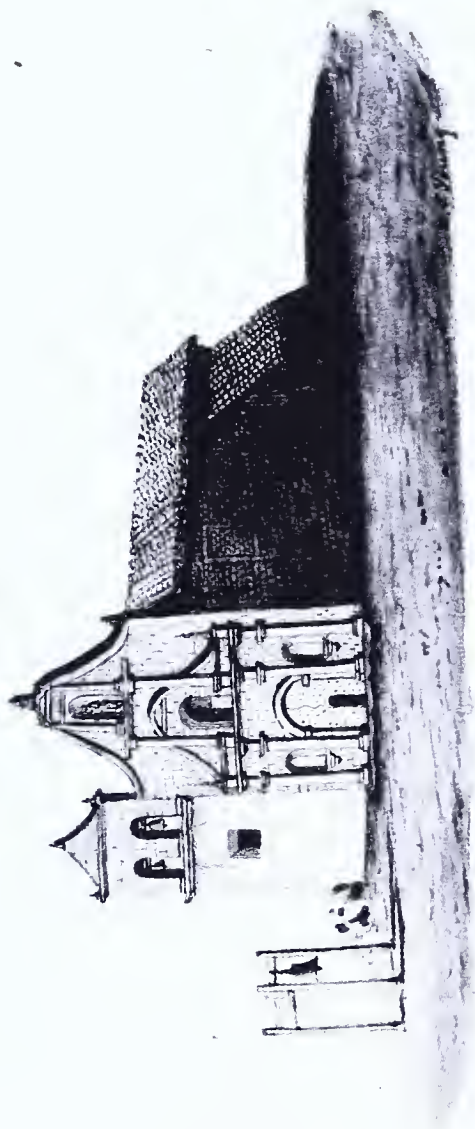
COMMODORE, PACIFIC SQUADRON, 1846-7.



*Com: Biddle at Honolulu.*  
*Sept. 10. 1846.*



*Carm: Biddle going to Lima,  
Dec. 31, 1846.*



*Com: Biddle in Church, at Monterey,  
May 2, 1847.*





CAMP BIDDLE NEAR MONTEREY, 1847.

23.



CALIFORNIAN.



COM. BIDDLE AT SAN FRANCISCO, 20TH JULY, 1847.



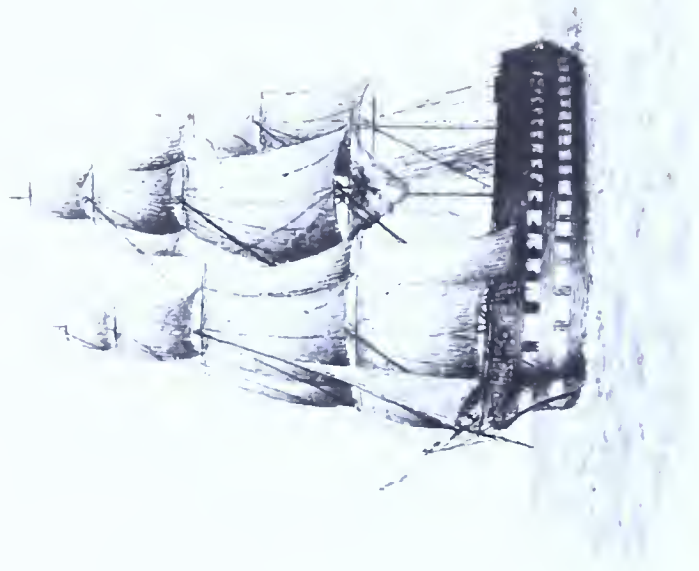


COM. BIDDLE AT CHURCH, SUNDAY, OCT. 10, 1847.





COM. BIDDLE OFF CAPE HORN, NOV. 1847.

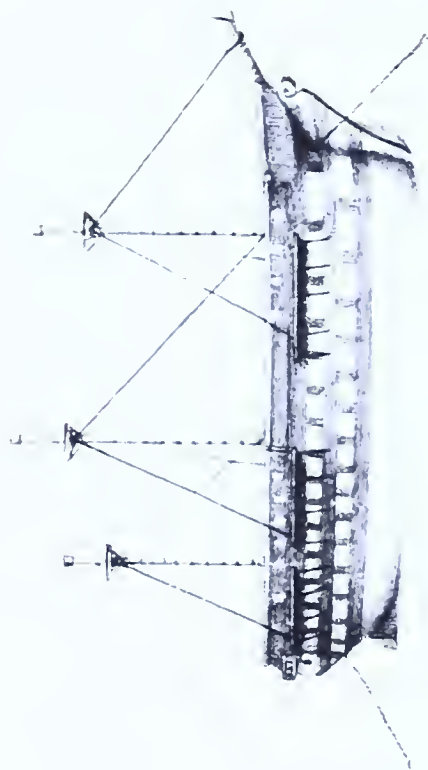


COM. BIDDLE CROSSING THE EQUATOR THE 20TH, AND LAST TIME, THE VERY LAST TIME, FEBRUARY 2, 1848.



COMMODORE BIDDLE ARRIVING OFF THE CHESAPEAKE IN TEN HUNDRED AND THREE DAYS FROM NEW YORK; A HORRIBLE PASSAGE. FORTUNATELY HE PUT INTO BRAZIL, CHINA, JAPAN, CHILE, PERU, CALIFORNIA, ETC., ETC., AND GOT SOMETHING TO EAT; OTHERWISE HE WOULD HAVE BEEN IN A BAD BOX—A MONSTROUS BAD BOX.

MARCH 2, 1848.



*Com. Biddle laid up in Ordinary.*









